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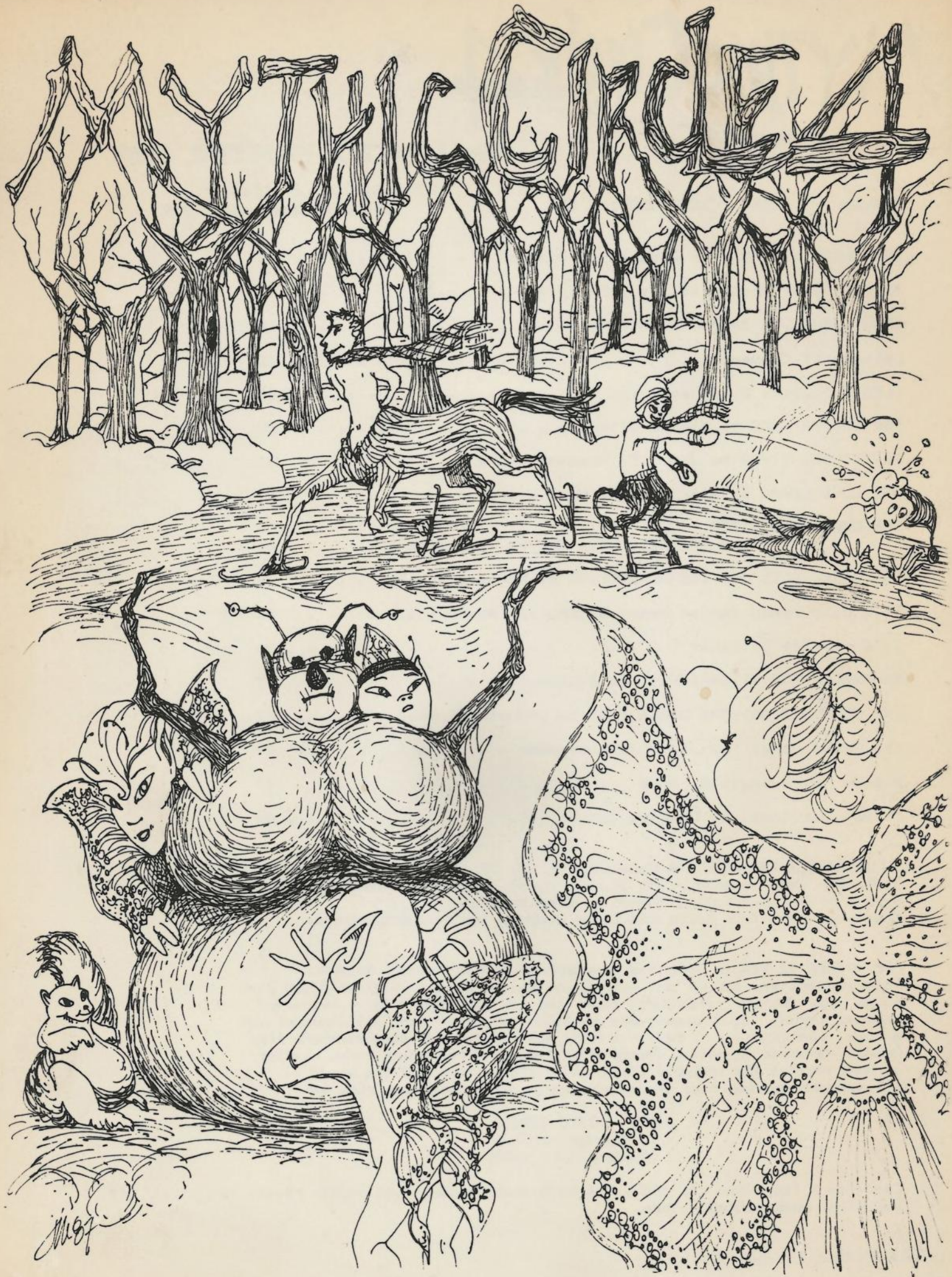
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MYTHIC CIRCLE 4

FALL INTO WINTER 1987

Edited by Lynn Maudlin
and Christine Lowentrout

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THE BLOOD-RED RUNE

by

Douglas A. Rossman

The western coast of Midgard was dotted with thousands of islands, ranging in size from tiny, rocky skerries on which no vegetation grew, to some quite large enough to support forests and villages. The one that lay farthest from the mainland, Ytre Öy—the Outermost Isle, was of middling size and, though grassy, generally lacked trees. 'Twas here that the mighty wizard Vilmeid came to study his magic arts in solitude, far from the prying eyes of neighbors.

Still, the sea can be crossed, and late one evening the dwarf Runa presented herself at Vilmeid's sod-roofed, timbered hall, and announced she had come with the prophecy that he had requested from the Norns. Surprisingly, Vilmeid reacted to her declaration with anything but pleasure. The richly robed, grey-bearded wizard folded his arms and glowered down in disbelief at the diminutive messenger who boldly stood before him, her hooded head barely topping his knees.

"Do the Norns think to insult me?" he snapped, his eyebrows furrowing ominously. "I knew that the Three would have to remain at Urd's Well, but to send a lowly dwarf to me with their prophecy?" His nose wrinkled with disdain. "Vilmeid is no mere bush wizard, woman, to settle for scraps from a jarl's table. I can make—or unmake—such men with a snap of my fingers, and those great lords are all careful not to annoy me . . . very careful, indeed. The Norns, too, would be wise not to arouse my enmity."

"And you would be wise, Vilmeid, not to see insult where none was intended," retorted Runa, pushing back the hood to reveal her owl-like eyes and large, pointed ears. "Save for the Three, none of the Sisterhood enjoys higher status than another, be she dwarf, or elf, or Aesir-kin. And," her voice bristled as she planted her hands on her hips, "you can be sure that I would not have come to Ytre Öy save in dire necessity. No dwarf likes the sea, and I'm still queasy from the boat trip over here. But none of the other sisters was available just now, so the Three sent me—and whether I like it, or you like it, is of no consequence."

"Don't be cheeky with me if you value your life," Vilmeid snarled as, bending down, he shook his forefinger under Runa's nose. The dwarf disdained a reply and the two just stood, glaring at each other, for a long minute. Then the wizard "humphed" and, turning, mounted the dais where he seated himself in his thronelike chair, ornately carved with figures of dragons.

"Well, get on with it," he said, grumpily. "If you've brought a prophecy, let me hear it . . . and then be gone. But," and

he shook his finger again admonishingly, "you can be sure that the Three are going to hear from me, too."

The dwarf stood facing him, her hands clasped at her waist, and recited in a singsong manner. "I, Runa, bring Vilmeid these words of Skuld, who has looked in Urd's Well and seen his fate.

"Vilmeid's own art shall be his bane,
His precious life-force out will drain.
This wizard's end shall he meet soon,
Let him beware the blood-red rune."

Whaaat?" shrielled Vilmeid incredulously, leaping to his feet. "You have the audacity to stand there and tell me that I should fear a rune, I who am the greatest rune master in the Nine Worlds? Skuld must have taken complete leave of her senses to make such a ridiculous prophecy."

"Skuld never makes mistakes," insisted Runa stubbornly. "Beware the blood-red rune," she said, and that is what she meant."

"Would you dare question my mastery of the runes, you miserable worm?" Vilmeid raged, thoroughly infuriated at what he perceived as Runa's insolent obstinance. "Then you shall become one. The ancient tales say that the first dwarves were created from maggots that fed on the giant Ymir's corpse. It seems only fitting that you should end as your race began . . . crawling, blind and mindless, in the bowels of the earth."

A cruel smile played across the wizard's thin lips as he stepped forward and extended his arms over the now thoroughly frightened, but still defiant dwarf. Drawing upon the enormous cosmic power he had learned to tap, Vilmeid sketched a series of icy blue runes in the air. They seemed to waver and coalesce, then settled on Runa's broad forehead. She screamed once, before her features flowed into shapelessness, and she shrank into the worm form her tormentor had decreed. Vilmeid disdainfully scooped her up in a coal scuttle and deposited her outside in the herb garden ("Where she might finally make herself useful," he sniffed).

Vilmeid did not sleep particularly well that night; not because of any remorse about Runa, but because Skuld's message haunted him. Could there be some aspect of the runic arts that he had not mastered? No, of that he was certain. Perhaps some obscure bit of arcane knowledge he had overlooked? Not likely . . . but not impossible. He wrestled with the problem until dawn when, after a quick and barely noticed breakfast, he concluded that the best defense against an attack of whatever kind—by weapons or magic—would be to set up a runestone at each of the four cardinal



points of the island, and to imbue them with a goodly part of his own power. After all, safe beneath the rune ward thus created, he would not need nearly so much personal power. The decision made, he at once set about preparing the stones, and by day's end the rune ward was in place. Exhausted both by his efforts and the partial loss of his power, Vilmeid collapsed in his bed, satisfied that the barrier would be proof against any assault. Let the Norns, or anyone else, do their worst!

* * *

As he came in sight of the large spring called Urd's Well, which lay hard by a great root of the World Tree—all-encompassing Yggdrasil, Thor Redbeard's legs still tingled slightly from having waded through the four icy streams that had rushed across his path. He was a bit puzzled when he failed to see any of the Norns, they for whom the Well served not only as a mirror of prophecy but whose water—when mixed with the white clay that encircled it—was a source of renewal for the Tree itself, assailed as it was root and bough by destructive cosmic forces. For in fact, the Norns' daily task of applying the healing white paste to the trunk was more important, by far, than their role as prophetesses. Should Yggdrasil die, the Nine Worlds would disintegrate and all existence cease!

Drawing closer to the Well, Thor was startled to hear the sound of weeping coming from the hall of the Norns. He could not recall ever before having seen or heard one of the Sisterhood cry, though their knowledge of the past, present, and future of all beings in the Nine Worlds might well have given them cause long before now. Thor shuddered to think what frightful event must have befallen—or was imminent—and he broke into a run for the door of the hall.

Pausing at the portal only long enough to announce his presence by thumping his huge

fist on the wooden door frame—entwined with carved, leafy representations of the Tree—Thor strode into the hall. No lesser Norns were to be seen, but the Three—ancient Urd, matronly Verdandi, and youthful Skuld—huddled close together, obviously shaken by grief.

"Why, whatever is the matter," inquired Thor, "to upset you so? Is Ragnarök upon us?" "No, Thor," sobbed white-haired Urd, the tears running in rivulets down her wrinkled face. "It's the wizard Vilmeid"

"He's destroyed one of our Sisters," wept beautiful Verdandi, who always reminded Thor of his own beloved wife, Sif.

"Dear little Runa," wailed Skuld, her eyes swollen and the creamy complexion of her sweet girlhood soured with red splotches and stained with tears.

Eventually they managed to pour out the whole horrible story, Thor being first shocked and then increasingly angry. His eyes took on the fiery glint that many a giant or troll had seen—much to their regret.

"What do you plan to do to him?" Thor asked them in a barely controlled voice. "Whatever it is, he deserves something worse."

"We can do nothing, Redbeard; it is not our way," replied Urd. "We are the observers and foretellers of örlög—fate, men call it—not its manipulators. We do not create or control it, whatever the gods or men may think." She pointed a bony forefinger at him. "I remember that which has been."

Verdandi chimed in: "I see that which is."

Skuld concluded: "And I foresee that which shall be. The past that Urd remembers and the present that Verdandi sees help create the future that I foresee. Vilmeid will not escape his fate, for he has helped to shape it."

"I'm confused," muttered Thor. "You say you Norns don't control fate, but then you

tell me that miserable wizard cannot escape his fate. I realize that deep thinking isn't my strong point, but even I can see the contradiction there."

Urd's ancient face crinkled with gentle amusement. "It isn't so much a matter that he can not escape as he will not. Let me explain. You see, Thor, all beings begin life limited by the very nature of what they are--Aesir and humans obviously have very different limitations, for instance. Within those limitations, however, one's life is shaped by all sorts of things--parents, friends, enemies, and most of all by the choices one makes." While she paused, Skuld and Verdandi nodded their agreement. "At the beginning of a being's life there is no single fate ordained, there are only numerous possibilities. But each choice one makes narrows the possibilities and, at the same time, establishes patterns of choice-making. For most, once these patterns are firmly established, their future choices become very limited and their fate is pretty well determined."

Skuld interposed in her sweet, almost childlike voice, "That's what we really do; we read patterns. And even if someone tries to escape his fate, he usually follows the patterns he's been weaving throughout his life. That's why my prophecies are almost never wrong."

Verdandi rose and placed her hands on the back of Skuld's shoulders. "Still, it is not impossible for someone with sufficient wisdom--and humility--to deliberately choose to alter his behavior. However, you needn't fear that Vilmeid will avoid his fate." Her upper lip curled scornfully. "It's not in his nature to change his own patterns . . . he holds too high an opinion of himself for that."

"This is all very interesting, but I'm more given to action than philosophy," growled Thor, pounding his fist in the palm of his other hand. "Is there anything in the laws that says I can't try to hasten him along his fated road to Hel's gate?"

"Go with our blessings," said Urd, rising shakily to her feet and leaning on her intricately carved walking stick. And Thor rushed off to his own great hall, many-roomed Bilskirnir, to fetch his goat cart and his terrible hammer, Mjöllnir.

* * *

The following morning a shame-faced Thor tentatively entered the hall of the Norns.

"I hate to admit it," he exclaimed huskily, "but I have failed you . . . and poor little Runa. Vilmeid has warded Ytre Öy with such powerful runes that I couldn't get close to it. Finally, in desperation, I hurled Mjöllnir at his hall, hoping to blast the roof off and flush the old fox from his lair, but the hammer seemed to hit some invisible barrier above the island and bounced away." Thor whistled ruefully. "I had no idea there were any wizards who could command such power!"

"He is the greatest of them all . . . in terms of rune lore," said Verdandi, "but the least in terms of compassion and humility."

"But you musn't trouble yourself on that account, young Thor." Urd gave him a soft,

but somehow almost sinister, smile. "Skuld has something to say to you."

"I know that we are pledged not to interfere," Skuld said, looking at her feet. Then she raised her deep blue eyes to stare full into Thor's, "But we Three have agreed that I can tell you something of what I saw in the Well this morning. It was rain, Thor, torrents of rain . . . falling on Ytre Öy. More than that I cannot say, for even Norns can bend the laws just so far." She looked at him appealingly. "Do you understand what I am saying?"

Puzzled, Thor looked deep into her eyes for several moments, then comprehension smoothed his furrowed brow. "Yes, I believe I do. I'm not at all sure I see how it will help, but I think I know what you want me to do . . . and I'll do it." With a reassuring smile, Thor once more took his leave.

The Three-who-are-One looked at each other with satisfaction, and the hall by Urd's Well rang with their triumphant laughter.

* * *

Driving his goat cart through the sky, Thor herded the storm clouds from far and near to form an ever-growing, ever-darkening mass over Ytre Öy. When it seemed the clouds could tower no higher nor the sky grow darker, he galloped into the heart of the mass, hurling thunderbolts left and right in wild abandon--truly the storm god in his element. Thus assaulted, the clouds relinquished their watery burden, and the rain began to pelt the island--first in increasingly larger drops, but then in sheets. Whenever the storm gave signs of letting up, Thor would round up new clouds to renew the assault. And so it continued for nine days.

Snug in his hall, Vilmeid had been somewhat annoyed at the inconvenience of being trapped indoors, but he was unconcerned about the ultimate outcome. The Outermost Isle was high and well drained, so there was no possibility of it being flooded, if that was Thor's intention. Had there been such a danger, Vilmeid would have directed the rune ward to deflect rain as well. No, Redbeard was probably just venting his frustration in this childish fashion.

On the evening of the ninth day the rain ceased and the tattered remnants of the storm clouds scudded off to the east, pursued by a stiff sea breeze. Vilmeid emerged from his hall to enjoy the fresh air and watch the setting sun from Ytre Öy's western headland. The walk to the headland was slowed by the soggy condition of the ground, so the sun disc had already touched the surface of the sea--casting a golden path to the island--by the time he reached the slight embankment just above the runestone he had raised there.

The stone appeared to be slightly tilted, perhaps having settled unevenly in the soggy soil, so Vilmeid started down the slope to reset it properly. He stepped on something small and wiggly, a worm driven out by the rain. Without pausing, he deliberately crushed it underfoot, but in doing so, lost his footing on the slick surface. The wizard's feet shot out from under him and he tumbled head-over-heels down the slope,

stopping only when his head hit the corner of the runestone with a loud and sickening crack. The force of the impact split his skull and toppled the runestone.

Vilmeid lay sprawled against the fallen stone, like a broken doll discarded by a thoughtless child, and felt his life ebbing away. With so much of his power invested in

the now useless rune ward, the wizard was helpless to heal himself. He drifted in and out of consciousness for a time before descending into the final darkness. His vision dimming, the last sight Vilmeid beheld was his own blood staining one of the runes red, the ~~M~~-rune—the rune of fate.

EDITORIAL

Okay, so we're late again. It's only a couple of weeks this time but, what with year-end holidays, it will probably seem later. Such is the editorial burden. We could give you all the good reasons why we're late, but would you care? Would it make any difference to you? Would you like us any better? Nah. While we're doing our 'mea culpas,' we must confess to completely missing that attractive typo in Joe R. Christopher's cleriheh until after issue #3 was copied, and you will find the explanation for the second appearance of "Hild" in the letters column. Just remember that it's hard to proofread on these cheap, low-rez computer screens (mercy! mercy!).

This is issue #4 and it marks our first complete year of existence. When Christine and I proposed this publication to the Council of Stewards (the Myth.Soc. board of directors), we guesstimated the operating expenses --what it costs to reproduce, what it costs to mail, etcetera-- and, in fact, we weren't too far off. But we were off. And therefore, you will note (if you read all the blurbs in the Table of Contents) that our subscription price has gone up to \$10.00 per year (four issues). That covers only our production costs; money to cover the expense of complimentary issues to our contributors will have to be absorbed by miscellaneous purchases of single issues at \$3.00 per copy (and we just have to hope we sell enough single copies).

Our goal is that we'll gain enough subscribers to justify financially going to print (rather than xerographic repro) on 11x17 paper (bound, like a real magazine. Wow!). If every subscriber would just get 2 or 3 friends to subscribe also, then we could do it! Yeah! (You're not excited. Why aren't you excited? Wouldn't you feel More Important if your story was printed in a Mythic Circle that was a Proper Rag??!). In all seriousness, we are encouraging our readers to spread the word; we're particularly interested in colleges and universities that have creative writing courses and we invite you to drop us a line (give us names and addresses, whenever possible) and we'll solicit subscribers.

We considered thoughtfully whether we could entice all you faithful readers to re-subscribe by offering you a special discount for the month of January, but the only way we could realistically do that is if we raised the subscription price by more than a dollar and offered you the \$10.00 rate as a bargain. We decided that it's better to offer the product to as many people as possible, as close to cost as

possible. We hope you all understand and will RENEW YOUR SUBSCRIPTIONS to Mythic Circle. We encourage you to share any ideas you might have for making the magazine better or more helpful. Could we offer an occasional article on some weird element of English grammar, for instance? Let us know.

And finally, we've got some neat things planned for the next few issues: our first anniversary issue will contain another previously unpublished story by Charles de Lint and our Spring-Summer issue (#6) has American Fantasy as a theme (to tie in with MythCon 19) and we invite all of you to submit appropriate stories. WE ACCEPT SUBMISSIONS ON COMPUTER DISK! IBM compatible or CPM systems are okay; we may be able to arrange for MacIntosh, too. We're glad to print a draft copy to read and, if your story's long, it may be cheaper to mail the disk than all that paper; just let us know it's a submission. The marvels of modern technology...

*Spurshaudin
and Christine Jowett*

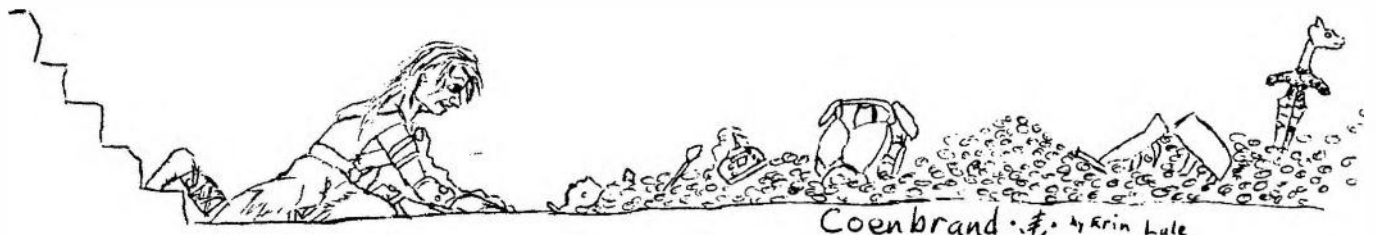


The Hoard of Hrothiric

by Erin Lale

The Hoard of Hrothiric was huge
And great and golden gleamed the treasures
Magics lay mired in mounds of coin.
Long had it lain in land unnamed
Forgotten even by the fairies of Fallowood
Guarded by rivers glinting green
And the Heights of Hrothiric hoary-topped.
Then came Coenbrand lost and careworn
In exile wandering the ways of the wood
A king crowned with creeping vinca
And for a scepter a willow-stick.
The remnants of banners he rustled gently
And passed the ruined wrought-iron gates
As the sun sank and the sky darkened
And the witch's moon watched him descend.
Down he went as the dark drew nearer
Cutting the cobwebs Coenbrand went
Down he dared on the dank stair
Bats biting at his bobbing head.
A dim light came to the deep darkness
Silver streaming through a crack from the sky
As tripping and tumbling he came to the treasure
And saw the secret before him spilled.
Opalescent shone ancient armour
Gems jangled against jewelled rods
The cuplike crowns of long-dead kings
To Coenbrand now all belonged.
With carven crystal himself he crowned
The willow exchanged for a wishing-ward
And wished himself and his riches home.
He sped above the secret sands
The rivers through meadows running rapid
The pointless paths that he had plied
When in sorrow he sighed in the sun.
Moonbeams bore him through the bare
And deathless darkness before the dawn
Over the ways he had wandered wild
Above the forests and fields forlorn
And the forsaken fortresses.
At last above the lengthy land
That Coenbrand called his own kingdom
He flew, and fairies set him down
Beside the moon-mirroring pool.
By the lake he loosed his laughing voice
And cried "Coenbrand claims this land again!"

But only an old owl heard his cry
That hooted and landed on the hoard
Perching with purpose in its pale eyes.
"I am Coenbrand, king of this land."
The moon was gone from melting mist
The sky was poor of stars
And the treasure twinkled in the twin light
Of night and yellow dawn.
The hoard a hundred suns became
As daylight drenched the gold
Where the owl had sat an old man stood
Leaning on a linden-staff.
"Go," was all old Grimgannd said.
Coenbrand went and welcome-waves
He got from peasants that he passed
And armies formed around his feet
And castle-walls he climbed with them.
In silence they slipped past sightless soldiers
Through the halls to the Throne they thronged
As shadows marching in airy shoes
Hidden from the hands of Haethred.
Unseen before the usurper
In wrath they ran about the room.
The false king fled from his false throne
Seeing swords by specters wielded
Slay his servants and soldiers proud.
Coenbrand came with killing fury:
Two kings of one kingdom fought in the cold
Upon the stone of the silent courtyard
Their bright blood binding them to die.
Together they tried to twist their fate
That they might live beyond the morn
Blood mingled sticky on the stone
Thoughts of victory and vast realms quenched.
Smiling angels singing sweet
Came for the two kings of Carrwang
And bore them up as blood brothers
To the halls where victor and vanquished are one
To laugh and lie and live together
In drunken boasting beyond the world's borders
To tell their tales and drink a toast
To whomsoever rules their realm
And wonder up above the wind
How the Hoard of Hrothiric fares.



GHOST HOUSE

by

Ronald C. Morgan II

"Well, Jack?" Peter Sargent said to him, "Are you going in or aren't you?"

Jack Horten looked through the branches of the trees at the old house. He didn't want to be this close to it, let alone go inside alone so late at night, but he knew that Peter would never let him hear the end of it if he chickened out.

"Aw, he's scared," Billy Carpenter, a tough-looking kid with a missing front tooth said, "he's not good enough for our group."

Jack really wanted to join GHOST, which stood for Great High Order of Specters and Terrors, but going into a house that was supposed to be haunted?

"You gotta go through with the initiation if you wanna join," Tom Philips reminded him.

"I gotta go," Jack said to himself, "or I'll be a chicken for life."

He started walking towards the old house. Each step brought him closer and closer to the old house and brought the lump in his throat higher and higher until he felt like he wanted to throw up.

He looked up at the old house, all two huge floors and an attic. It looked like it was about to fall down, the way it sagged on one side. He wondered if the house was sinking and when he went inside if it would sink into the ground and suffocate him.

He climbed up the rotted wooden steps and walked along the front porch, which sagged beneath him.

He put his hand out to turn the doorknob. In the light from the full moon he could see his hand shaking like crazy.

"I am crazy," he said to himself, "what am I doing here?"

He pulled open the door. Its hinges protested so loudly that he felt like he might faint. If anything was inside, it had heard him by now.

For the last five minutes he'd been fumbling for his flashlight, and at last he found it and, taking it out of his pocket, turned it on, and shined the tiny light inside the door.

He could see three white things, and almost ran off right then, but finally realized that they were only sheets covering furniture.

He could hear some ticking coming from inside, and his light picked up a huge old grandfather clock, pendulum still moving after ten years.

It had been ten years ago that very day that Simon Holbert, who had built the house, disappeared, never to be seen again. That was why Peter had chosen that particular day to have the initiation.

Jack stepped inside of the house and looked around. Beyond the covered

furniture was a big box that looked like one of those old-fashioned radios they used to have years ago.

He was supposed to stay in the house for an hour and he didn't want to stay a second longer than he had to. He was glad the clock was still going, because he didn't have a watch.

He decided he'd sit right next to the door and wait for the hour to be up, then he'd get out of there like crazy.

After a few minutes, the clock struck the hour. he looked up. It was ten o'clock. He counted the loud, deep bongs. As the last one faded he noticed that the entire room was starting to get misty. He wondered if it was his eyes, and rubbed them, but the mistiness only got worse.

He jumped to his feet and started to run out, but in the doorway stood a tall figure dressed all in black with a turned-up collar and an old beaten-up hat pulled down over its face.

Jack just about passed out then, but it occurred to him that there was a back door to the house, so he turned and headed towards it, only to run into another, similarly dressed individual. Before he could turn, a rough hand clasped around his wrist. He could feel the bones against his skin.

He pulled against the creature, but it held him effortlessly. Turning, he could vaguely see the other one coming towards him.

The figure holding him turned and led him to a door in the hall. It pulled the door open. Jack couldn't see a thing. The creature led him forward. "Watch the steps," it said in a dull, emotionless voice.

He grasped for a handrail and held on until he reached the end of the staircase. He could see a light coming from a room.

"Through here," the cold voice said, "do not try to escape."

Jack could vaguely make out the other figure coming down the stairs, and knew it would be no use trying to escape, so he walked to the doorway and looked in.

Standing near the middle of the room, in front of a huge kettle, stood the source of the light. It was a bright green in color, and its pupilless eyes stared into Jack's own.

"Coming here will cost you far more than merely your life," it said in the same emotionless voice as the thing that had led him down the stairs had spoken in, except that the green thing's voice was louder and echoed hollowly. "Come forward, boy. Do not attempt to resist."

Jack turned around, but the two figures were blocking the doorway. They were holding their hats as if they were paying homage to the glowing creature.

From the glow, Jack could see they were decaying skeletons.

"Come."

Jack stepped toward the specter, wondering how much longer his heart would hold out. The ghost pointed to the kettle. "Look."

Jack went to the edge and looked down into it. What he saw made him scream and trip over his own feet as he moved away.

Inside was a man, on fire, screaming silently. For one brief moment, it had stared into his eyes, and in that moment Jack felt as if it had said, "You shall soon join me."

"That is the last fool that came to this place at the hour when the underworld and your world meet," the ghost said.

Jack tried to run, but the skeletons blocked his path.

"Take him to the next room," the ghost said, "I have plans for him."

The skeletons reached for him, but he slipped between their legs and ran like mad up the dark steps. He could hear them following him and knew that if he tripped he was finished.

He ran through the hall into the living room. The front door was locked. He tried the windows. They were stuck.

The skeletons came into the room. He picked up a chair and threw it through the window, then jumped through, ignoring the broken glass.

He ran down the driveway towards the fence, hoping once he'd passed it he'd be safe, but standing in front of the gate was the ghost.

"Did you think you could escape me so easily?" the transparent thing said. "For that your punishment will be even worse than the one I had planned for you."

The ghost came slowly towards him. Jack backed away, right into the skeletons.

"Take him back," the ghost commanded.

The skeletons lifted him off his feet and came back to the house. They'd just gotten to the porch when the old clock started to strike eleven.

"Nooo!" the ghost wailed. It flew right through him and into the still closed door. The moment it had been inside of him, he'd felt so cold he couldn't stand it. He was still shivering when he suddenly fell onto the porch. He looked up to see the skeletons start to break apart. In moments they were just a pile of dust on the porch, which was soon blown away by the wind.

He stood staring for quite a while, then, too tired to run away, he walked slowly back to the fence.

"It said ten was when its world crossed mine," he thought, "so when eleven came, its world left, killing those things. Whew!"

Once outside the fence, he sank to the ground.

"Hey, Jack!" a voice said, "Now you can join GHOST!"

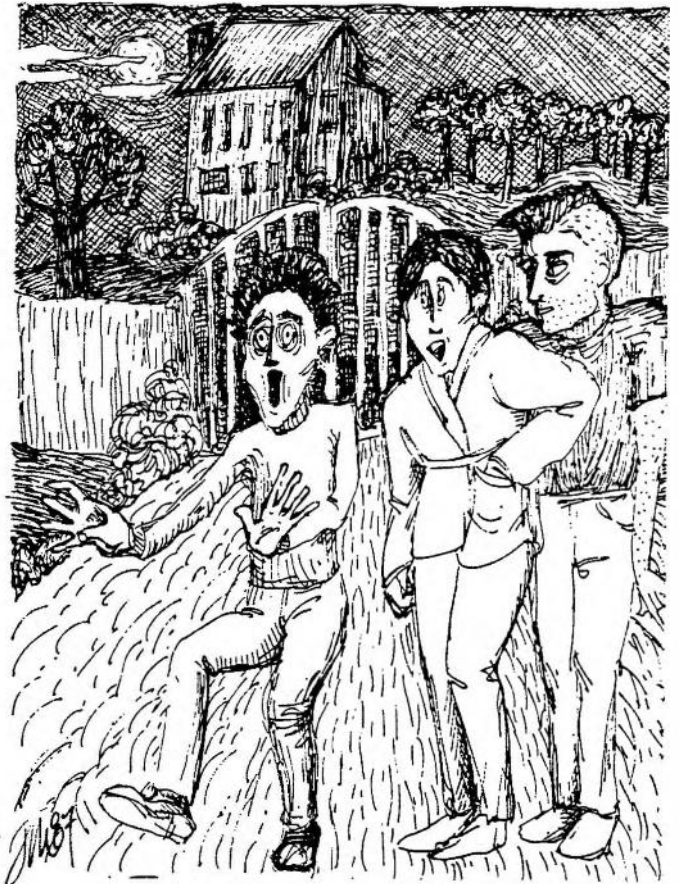
"Join the ghost!" Jack thought, "It's back! It still wants me!" He ran all the way home, screaming, and was sick for days.

"What's with him?" Tom said, staring after Jack.

"Aw, he's nuts," Bill said, "he's too chicken to join us."

"He never left," Peter said, "he spent the whole hour there, so why'd he just get scared after he came out? I don't get it."

Jack never joined, and after a while, Peter quit also. He didn't like to think of what might have scared Jack. With only two members left, the club soon broke up, and the only ghost that's ever around that town now is a green one that comes about once every ten years and stays for only an hour.



The Unremembered Tomb

An Acrostic by Gwenyth E. Hood

Visiter, vibrant in colors of dawn,
Above my bare grave your roseate glory,
Moves through the ground where my sleeping bones lie,
Piercing through eyelids content to be closed.
In ancient times, I starved with lust
Resigned to death, my hunger died.
Even now you have dashed my empty dreams of peace.

LETTERS FOR COMMENT

I am really pleased with how Mythic Circle #3 looks -- and not just because my story and art are in it! (I'm particularly impressed with the woman of flowers on the cover -- that fits right in with my Bloddeuwedd ["Flower Face" to the Celts]).

The story I liked most was "Tales of the Attondar" by Sarah Beach, although I feel there are too many similarities in this piece to Tolkien's Silmarillion, etc. That brings me to the clerihow: I will say this briefly, and not to arouse antagonism, and you can take it or leave it (blah, blah, blah): "Tolkien" is pronounced "Tolk-uhn" not "Tolk-een" as too many fans make the mistake of saying (and I can prove this: see pg 218 of The Letters Of J.R.R. Tolkien, Houghton Mifflin, 1981. It says "it is a Germanic name (from Saxony), an anglicization of Tolkiehn, i.e. Tolkuhn."). Also -- I find that the beauty of Tolkien's Eldarin languages comes out more strongly when the urge to put syllabic stress on the first syllable, Anglo-style, is somewhat suppressed. "Sin-dar-in" sounds much more sensuous and musical than "Sin-dar-in," for example.

I could go on endlessly because I have heard too many people mangle the pronunciations of any word connected with Tolkien. But enough -- it was a great issue and MC is definitely one of the better 'zines around.
Thank you,

Paul Rucker
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Dear Mythic Circlers

Thank you for issue #3 of your illustrious magazine. I've enjoyed each of the issues so far and it's about time I earned my keep with a letter of comment.

There's no doubt in my mind what is the best story of the issue -- it's "Tales of the Attondar." Although it's the longest story, it went by quickly and smoothly. Maybe that's because I've read most of the story before, in a slightly different version under the title of "The Silmarillion." It's still a good story, no matter who tells it. And Sarah Beach makes a few interesting changes to the original, by making Cadar a slightly more venial and pugnacious fellow than the original Melkor. The illustrations were also nice.

Of the shorter pieces, I most enjoyed "Archie's Game," and not just because the dog gets its just reward at the end! It's a striking moral tale of hidden checks and balances in the universe, and the ending is both horrifyingly inevitable and shockingly unexpected.

The Mythic Circle 10

If you must publish so much poetry, I wish you'd separate it out from the stories in the table of contents. And if more than one or two of the poems rhymed occasionally, that would be even nicer.

So Pat Reynolds would like to know what happened to Rapunzel Godiva in my story "The Princess in the Teflon Slipper." I did some research in the Encyclopedia Stupida, and here's what I found. Pat is correct about one thing: when Rapunzel got back to England, her husband (a rather nasty fellow named Godfrey Godiva) was so upset about her transgress against the French morality laws (not an easy thing to do, you understand) that he locked her up in a tower. However, she was eventually rescued -- not by a prince -- but by a kindly old witch named Mother Gothel who took Rapunzel to live in a briar patch where the poor girl joined up with the most advanced band of robbers of the day, Robyn Hood's Merry Persons, and eventually married Br'er Tuck, Friar Tuck's nephew. Charges of bigamy were never proven. Rapunzel refused to appear in court, commenting only that she had had a hair's-breath escape.

Stefan Bilandic
Cleveland Heights, Ohio

This was a special poetry issue -- I guess my introduction of the poetry section disappeared when we broke up the section and interspersed poems throughout the issue. What do you want in the table of contents, separate-but-equal treatment?! Actually, I think I've often listed poems in upper & lower case letters (versus all capitals) and we'll endeavor to do that in the future. We have nothing against rhymed poetry except the fact that it's harder to do well -- English is a rhyme-poor language and rhymed poetry can easily feel forced and awkward. Personally, I much prefer good non-rhymed verse to bad rhymed verse, but to each his own. As for Rapunzel, are you sure that wasn't a hare's-breath escape?

Issue 3 was particularly good for poetry. I was moved and impressed by several without being quite sure what they were about. For example, I wasn't sure whether "Gift" by Lynn Maudlin was about an encounter with a benevolent being or an encounter with a malevolent being at first and then a benevolent one. In the "Virgin" poem I was pretty sure but not quite sure that the virgin was going nowhere because she was about to be devoured. In Angelee Anderson's "Visitation," I was very

impressed but wasn't sure whether it was supposed to describe a mystical encounter with God, somewhat along the lines of St. Theresa (have I got the right Saint? Maybe it was somebody else) who upon being manhandled by the divinity was told, "This is how I treat my friends," and answered, "No wonder you have so few, Lord!" (Where did that story come from? I read it in one of L'Engle's poems). Or was this some other mythical creature, an elemental spirit of Muse, perhaps? But the poem was beautifully written and created full conviction that Angelee Anderson knew precisely the quality of the experience she was writing about, whatever it was. The three medieval poems by Paul Zimmer definitely enhanced the issue, accompanied by T. Callahan's wonderful illustrations. They certainly evoked the scenes they were meant to evoke and there was no question what they were about.

"Archie's Game" was a good compact story which ended in poetic justice, and the Maudlin illustration brought it out beautifully. "The Man Of The Billion Words" was a clever and entertaining story, though seriously, while I'd like to have fairies around, I hate to think the world was actually controlled by beings like the ones in that story. "The Last Card" was impressive -- the story and illustrations both had a great deal of character. The complexity of Bloddeuwedd's (what a wonderful name! It must have taken nerve to stick to it) character and intentions caught my interest and kept me reading. The ending was fitting, though I was sorry it was so unhappy. However, a few things did bother me. The workings of the resurrection stone was never explained. If it worked for its original owner without being on her finger after she was killed, why didn't it also work for Angus and Bloddeuwedd? Also I did not think the conversation Angus overheard was ambiguous enough to make him so angry. His mistrust of Bloddeuwedd would be more convincing if he only overheard part of it.

I was also impressed by Sarah Beach's "Tales of the Attondar," which covers the same ground as Tolkien's Ainulindale. I was impressed that she was able to choose evocative names so successfully. To be sure, some of the names confused me, just as Tolkien's did. I am definitely curious about what kind of plans Cadar has with Lennan. But I was distracted throughout the story by the misuse of "shalt" and "art" forms. In the Shakespearean/King James period which is, I presume, being evoked with this language, "shalt" and "art" and the -t ending generally applies only to the second person, singular, familiar form, "thou," as in "Thou shalt do no murder," and "Our Father, [thou] who art in Heaven." The third person singular forms are different, most commonly ending in -th, as in "he hath a demon" and "[he] sitteth on the right hand of God the Father." But "shall" is irregular and so is the verb "to be." The King James

conjugations for some common verbs, I believe, are:

I am	shall	have	sit
thou art	shalt	hast	sittest
he is	shall	hath	sitteth
ye are/we	shall	have	sit
are/they are	"	"	"

Shakespeare, writing about the same time, often uses the -s form instead of the -th form for the third person singular, as in "She speaks!" and "Here comes the lady!" For the verb "to be," the conditional or subjunctive "be" forms are used more often than they are today, in cases where the speaker is uncertain of a fact as in "Hail, virgin, if you be!" or "Turn thee and defy me, an thou be'st a man!" or "be he alive or be he dead/ I'll grind his bones to make my bread." If this annoying problem could be cleared up, I think the story would have a better chance.

I loved the Callahan illustration which went with "The Storyteller." I'd like to frame it. The one that went with "The Visitation" was wonderful too, but I still don't know what it means. I must close for now, wishing you a good fourth issue.

Gwenyth E. Hood
Mansfield, Pennsylvania

Isn't it nice that we can enjoy poems without having to understand them? I can't presume to interpret "Visitation" for you (Angelee?), but as for "Virgin" I felt the title was the key (yes, she is going nowhere for she's the sacrificial virgin); as for "Gift," we're talking "of God" (as opposed to evil) here ("benevolent" sounds impotent); I'd like to escape the dark = malevolent equation (what kind of subconscious message are we giving to black kids with the fairy tale/ western assumptions that white = good and black = bad?). As for "The Last Card," my own interpretation is Angus as one of those hair-trigger, jealous males -- he is an ancient warrior, after all; and as I read it, he left the ring in Bloddeuwedd's possession so it couldn't help him -- perhaps it does resurrect Bloddeuwedd...

First let me say how much I continue to enjoy not only seeing my work in print but also the lovely artwork that has accompanied it. I found Lynn Maudlin's illustrations for "The Hearth" in Issue 2 very moving, and am quite pleased with Tim Callahan's illustration for "Visitation" (my husband thinks this one looks like me).

I must also comment on my appreciation of critiques of my work by readers in their letters. I especially appreciate Gwenyth E. Hood's analysis of "The Hearth" in Issue 3. Regarding her comment on the "long-distance" quality of

my writing: this may partly be a result of my ornate style, though the style does not seem distant to me when I am writing as it evidently does to some readers. In the case of "The Hearth," this particular chapter takes place at a substantial remove in both time and space from the rest of the novel from which it is excerpted, and so the distance here is somewhat intentional.

Some comments on Issue 3:

I found the quality of poetry to be generally much superior to that of the first two issues. Lynn Maudlin's "Gift" struck me as a sort of companion piece to my own "Visitation." I admired "Dog Days Gone" for succeeding in making something romantic out of something so contemporarily mundane as a median strip.

"The Good Folk" contained a good idea, nicely told, but I feel that Mr. Connelly's style could use a little more polish and flair. "The Last Card" showed great promise; however, continuity seemed lacking to me due to the squeezing of a fairly substantial story idea into so few words -- perhaps this would be better as a novella.

To Sarah Beach: you handle the high style well, but I think a few of your archaic verbs were mis-conjugated (perhaps some were typographical errors?). "They wilt" should be "they will" -- "wilt" is used only with the second person singular, "thou." "These words art" should be "these words are" -- once again, "art" is used only with "thou"; by the same rule, "the light of the Sun" shall, not "shalt." "We seeth" should be "we see" -- "seeth" is used with the third person singular. "Thine thought" should, I believe, be "thy thought," as "thine" is only used before nouns beginning with vowels. Read a lot of the King James Bible and you will find that all this becomes second nature. Also, I would like to see you use your style at the service of content that is less derivative than "Tales of the Valar" -- oops! -- Attondar. It is useless trying to compete with Professor Tolkien at what he does better than anyone.

To Charles Rampp, whose poem in this issue I like very much but whose stories I cannot make head or tail of: the dash is not intended as a universal substitute for the comma, the semi-colon, etc.

Finally, I would like to make some general comments based on the works published in The Mythic Circle so far; this is strictly personal taste, with which I expect that most of your readers would not agree. Regarding writing style, I would like to see stories that are more "atmospheric," i.e. concentrate on mood and setting as well as dialogue and action. Too much of the latter with not enough of the former makes stories seem rushed and jerky to me (on the other hand, my own style is probably too ponderous for most palates). In terms of content, I have noticed a superfluity of stories with

mundanely contemporary settings or based on Celtic mythology. While I like both these sorts of stories when well done, there are a myriad of other avenues open to exploration in fantasy and I hate to see those avenues neglected in favour of what happens to be popular at the moment. I feel sometimes in reading fantasy authors -- professional as well as non-pro -- that the major influences on them as writers are other writers. While I am the first to admit that the authors I love have had a profound effect on me, a writer's first resource for material should be his own life experience; this is no less true of fantasy writers than "realistic" ones, for we too are engaged in the business of truth-telling, albeit from a romantic or symbolic perspective.

Thank you for putting up with my nit-picky ravings, and keep the Mythic Circles coming.

Angelee Sailer Anderson
Westminster, California

In response to your comments on story content, perhaps Christine and I should tell you that we've got several pieces we're holding for Issue 6 -- our planned "American fantasy" issue as a tie-in with MythCon 19 (Berkeley, California, next July - with Ursula K. LeGuinn!). So, at least in #6, you'll be seeing some Amerind themes and hopefully other goodies as well. Writers, take note -- there's still time to submit! We don't have that great a lead time! But what about S. Dorman's two pieces in TMC #2? Sri Lanka and Viet Nam, respectively.

As for stylistic complaints, ain't it grand we've all got different taste?! What a boring world it would otherwise be. Finally, "Attondar" was printed from Sarah's computer disk, so we claim no responsibility for typos on that one (Joe Christopher's clerihew is another matter, a cause for blushing and many apologies); we also didn't put in all her specific accents (the limitations of American typewriters/computers!). As for your "nit-picky ravings," keep 'em coming!

The Good Folk and The Man Of The Billion Words are modern day fairy tales that don't lose anything by taking place today rather than several hundreds of years ago. Perhaps it's for someone to start a new Blue Book of Fairy Tales similar to the original but with all modern day stories. Archie's Game reminds me of the Beatrix Potter tales. It's not bad but I found the ending rather abrupt.

The Mulberry is a strange story, something that sounds like a stage play. Most writers, I think, would have had Kira lose George and turn herself back into a tree. I'm glad that that didn't happen. Tales Of The Attondar is similar to the beginning of Tolkien's Silmarillis (sic), as well as David Eddings' opening to the

Belgariad. I hope Sarah goes into detail with this early time period, something which Tolkien decided not to do, believing there wouldn't be a market for such tales. The Last Card was an interesting story, but I'm afraid I don't see just what it was that Angus noticed under the old crone's wrinkles just before he died. The Storyteller sounds like the perfect introduction to a horror book, and the drawing is excellent. I'd like to see both of them at the beginning of a horror collection like "Dark Forces." Tim and Barbara might want to consider working together on projects.

I've noticed that Mythic Circle is growing with each issue. #1 was 38 pages long, #2 42 pages, and #3 44 pages. At this rate, by #30 you'll be bigger than Analog.

Oh, and by the way, I AM mad at Lucas for not starting Star Wars off on episode I, and even madder that he won't even consider making parts I-III and VII-IX. Hopefully none of Mythic Circle's writers will decide to just give up writing once they've gotten somewhere. I think that's the worst thing a writer can do, to both his fans and to himself.

Ronald C. Morgan II
Norwalk, California

-- strange page counts you've got there --
#1 was 40, #2 was 44, and #3 was 46 pages in length (technically, add another two pages to include the back cover). Our intention is to remain around 50 pages. In The Last Card, Angus saw the faerie-lady he thought he'd killed (top of pg 36), under the crone's wrinkles.

Dear Lynn, Christine, Paul J C, Peter, Mindy, Barbara, Paul E Z, Charles, Janet, Tim, Angelee, Sarah, Joe, Paul R, Gwenyth, Anne, Stanley, Susan, Jane, Mary-Lane, Deborah, Ronald, Lee, Bonnie, and Mary-Anne;

I have only had a quick glance through Mythic Circle Three on the train, as I hope to get this letter back to Lynn and Christine in time for Mythic Circle Four. Unfortunately, this means I've only had a few hours, and so I can only comment on a few things.

I was drawn by Tim's illustration to Hild; it reminded me of the work of Charles Keeping (who illustrates Rosemary Sutcliffe, Geoffrey Trease and Kevin Crossley-Holland). Hild itself was worthy of the illustration. It has some wonderful long alliterative lines such as "Hogni hurled ring and reason away". Despite the fairly strict rhyme scheme and general binding of alliteration, there were few forced lines and the striding-on story line was never held up to let the pattern of sounds be completed.

If only there were not the miles, I would lend Joe my copy of The Mabinogi

edited by Patrick K Ford (University of California Press). This has another tree-poem, the basis of Greaves arguments. It is a good translation (good = I like it as a poem in modern English!) of Cad Goddeu, "The Battle Of The Trees."

I don't understand the title of Durindana, but I liked it best of all Paul's poems. The others are more vignettes.

dog days gone is excellent too. I will read it again at my leisure, and no doubt do all the take-it-apart-and-see-how-it-works exercises I was taught in school. Right now I don't care how it works, it does.

It has struck me that understanding literature is rather like understanding writing (in the palaeographer's sense). It is easier to see the pattern in something unfinished or unpolished. I was struck with this thought when I read your comment that the gods can sleep with whom they like (or words to that effect!) as I read The Last Card soon after. I did not, at first, like this story very much. I got lost. Where does it take place? It seems like St. George's Channel to me. Bloddeuwedd isn't the Bloddeuwedd I know,, but I don't know who she is: tywyll teg and sidhe and uncle Tom Cobley and all it seems. I didn't realise that I wasn't supposed to understand Welsh.

When the author chooses not to write in the characters/landscapes/culture, I prefer the gods (or heroes or cultures) to be kept distinct. Then I can at least place my own preconceived ideas around the words. Apart from the total Celtic Stew, I really liked this story: I would like to see Paul do a re-write in a non-Celtic setting!

Best wishes to all (Merry Christmas, if appropriate).

Pat Reynolds
Milton Keynes, England

-- It seems to me that the more you know about the subject about which an author writes, the more likely you are to struggle with the details -- and their inaccuracies. This is clearly the case for you and The Last Card -- you know more about the Celts than the average American reader who will, therefore, not notice the "Celtic Stew" aspect of the piece (I certainly didn't; I'm not sufficiently familiar with that area). I am glad, nonetheless, that you enjoyed the story itself.

I hope everybody takes the time to read Hild aloud -- it really is a terrific piece and much stronger when spoken (as is the case with most poetry) AND it appears again, in complete and correct form, in this issue (*sigh*).

Dear Lanolin, Christingling, Uncle Toddy,
Quinton Wormwood, Mahatmamma, Brer
Rabinowitz, Stan, Laurel, Andy and all the
Hardies:

Having burrowed through your recent
issue (MC 3) in a pique of everest, I
thought it recumbent upon me to lay to
rest several sleeping dogmas before they
bloom. Before setting type to paper,
however, I spent a week translating the
Sonnets From The Portuguese into the
original arabesque, and another two weeks
hunting for my passport so I could return.
I am presently adrift between two
brunettes, somewhere off the coatsleeves
of Camus, in the Horace of Mann. The
weather is haughty and stapling, by turns,
and must account for a certain
contortuplication in this l.o.c. Without
further hairdo, these are my random
thoughts:

1) I noticed there were no stories
about screaming socialists, dispensing
reams of pamphlets, as thick as the
Federal Budget, on chilly street corners.
Is there some editorial prohibition
against people who drool for a living
promenading through your pages?

2) Creative typing aside, the
topography of your magazine needs some
work. There is nothing worse than
unemployed topographers spending all day
surfing, when they could be out surveying
unmarried women like the rest of us.

3) All your pages were numbered
consecutively! While I have nothing
against regularity, literary magazines
should be like parking meters: they work
only when you don't have enough change in
your pockets. Perhaps you could run out
of paper during the middle of a
printing...or insert ads for tennis shoes,
where the endings of epic poems should
be...or transcribe old English madrigals
into reggae, just to throw the scansion
off...

4) I don't mind gods of different
religions meeting in fiction. What I
object to is when sprites from poems start
dating hallucinations from short stories,
and then begin procreating in all those
sly pen-an-ink drawings in the margins. I
find this pernicious.

5) Finally, while 37% of your readers
seem to favor a Gaelic lilt to their
writing, a full 43% prefer garlic with a
lemon twist on theirs; but, what I want to
know is this: if you take all the
contributions and lay them side by side,
could you make a Spanish omelet? This
issue has not been resolved.

The tide is rising, the sun is
setting, and I must be off. I trust that
these comments have been of some
instructional volume to you.

Ollie Mantra
Cornish, Hen

-- Addressing your questions numerically:
#1 = no, only an editorial prohibition
against droolers promenading in my shorts;
#2 = WE are not out there surveying
unmarried wimmen! Speak for yourselves
(oh, I guess you are); #3 = This is
unfeasible as we can't possibly know when
you don't have sufficient change in your
pockets -- therefore, we must work all the
time; #4 = Yes and in Heaven they make
little dead babies; #5 = we don't lay any
of our contributors; it's against our
editorial policy and is generally viewed
as unprofessional -- Spanish, garlic, or
knot. does your keeper know you're out?

CL: When shall we see Sonnets From The
Portuguese... and Portuguese whom?

Dear Mythic Circlers,

Even though I profess to be a writer,
I don't know how to express my ongoing
delight in Mythic Circle. When I receive
each issue, I sit down with a pleasurable
excitement to see the degree of variety
that has been appearing.

Anyway, on to commenting.

LETTERS first: I love the way Pat Reynolds
begins her letters. And it's delightful
that she makes such an effort to
participate at that distance. Brava! Pat.
And I thought it was just super that Jane
Yolen took the time to write her wonderful
letter of comment on MC#2. But dear me!
Knowing that someone of her stature is
reading MC so carefully will put me on my
toes when I submit something in the
future!

THE STORIES:

THE GOOD FOLK: I found some of the
sentences a bit awkward. For instance,
shouldn't "third generation Irish" be
"third generation Irish-American"? As
written, the man's grandparents immigrated
to Ireland not America. Also, Molly may
ask "whose ways?" but the way the previous
paragraph goes, "their ways" looks like it
refers to American Indians. Anyway, the
story does have charm, but I found it a
little flat because it seems to lack a
real tension.

ARCHIE'S GAME: This story has its own
appeal, but I think the end would be more
poignant if the last rabbit was presented
as being (clearly) the ghost of the first
rabbit, and also if in the middle section
Archie grows to miss the first rabbit. Of
course, that might make Archie a bit too
anthropomorphic. But I enjoyed it.

THE MAN OF THE BILLION WORDS: The
linch-pin of the story, the fact that Jon
talks (babbles) too much needs to be
heightened. Also, in the giant's house
section, it would be better if there was
more indication that Jon can't talk again.
Perhaps he can show frustration at this,
but gradually he learns to cope, so that
at the end he has learned his lesson and
uses fewer words than of old. However, it
is fun and I liked the idea.

THE MULBERRY: The matter-of-fact tone
in this story is charming when it is

dealing with the girl's transformation into a tree. Because of that however, I felt I wanted more wonder on George's part as far as he regarded her. Surely five years as a tree gave her some touch of fey-ness that would have intrigued him. The ending thus seems a little flat, which is disappointing after the charming start.

THE LAST CARD: An interesting tale, but the telling of it is uneven. For so short a tale, I don't know if the elaborate explanation of the 2 sets of Tarot was needed. Also, since Angus has heard Bloddeuwedd plead with Naihar that he not kill (whomever), would Angus then suddenly think she's a traitor?

And lastly, TALES OF THE ATTONDAR: There's nothing like reading one's own material in print and seeing... let us call them minor flaws. Some typos got by me. But also I was chagrined to find the first paragraph overloaded with a particular word (or is it over-

"lighted"?).

THE POEMS:

"The Vanilla Tree" is interesting. I believe I heard Pat read this at a Mythcon. What arouses my curiosity is what the significance of the Vanilla Tree is (since I love vanilla flavor - except in ice cream; not that that has anything to do with the poem). "The Storyteller": I wondered if storytellers are that obviously sinister. Still, I liked this poem. "Avalon" struck me as somehow being off-center. "Bound in the cavern of the womb/...Arthur, waits"? Given that the legend says Arthur waits for some distant age, it seems bizarre that he's waiting in the womb. What woman is going to put up with that indefinitely? The language is okay, but it just doesn't seem to take me anywhere specific. Sorry, Paul. "Departure of the Lordly Folk" is nicely handled. The language use reminds me of Irish poetry. The contrast between the ethereal Folk and the mundane mortals might be stronger, but the poem has its poignancy. In "Durindana" Paul creates a clear tableau, but it seems to me he could have fleshed it out a bit more (not much to be sure, but just a bit) to make it more powerful. "Gift" speaks of the uneasiness of creative power. I also found "Virgin" a wonderful picture of a dragon, and the speaker rather brave for venturing into its company. "Hild" I have heard Tim recite and in reading it again I admired his use of alliteration. "Visitation" has a nice eerie touch. In spite of the fact that I'm not up on clerihevs, I did like "Secret Vice." "Golden One" didn't strike me as being particularly evocative. "Phusis," however, is good, going from the image of a girl dancing to something more cosmic.

And lastly, THE ART: Bonnie Callahan's cover is beautiful. I loved it. Paul Rucker's illos for his story are very interesting. But my favorite is Tim Callahan's dragon on pg. 19. "Gossamer wings" indeed! Color me green.

Nice that you enjoy the 'zine so much, Sarah, and even nicer that you comment on the contents in such depth. I think you're taking words very literally, though, when it comes to the poems and in many cases the work is more Impressionist than Old Masters... know what I mean? Just wait until we start printing Dada verse -- take cover! However, I was very glad to see you mention the wonders of "Hild" read aloud (worth doing, Gentle Readers). But whatever made you think the speaker in "Virgin" had any intention of approaching the dragon? Venturing into a dragon's company is not something done willingly, however brave one might be, and the title gives away her relationship to the beast (as in "future dinner").

CL: Thanks for the support, Sarah! Though I would like to exhort you to be "on your toes" for all your readers -- that's how a writer stretches!

Mythic Circle keeps getting better, particularly the layout, typeface and illustrations. I found Mythic Circle #1 difficult to read, but #3 looks good.

I enjoy seeing the fiction and poetry of people I've met at Mythcons and between the covers of Mythlore and Mythprint.

Many thanks for the fantasy poetry! There's never enough around to read, and so much of what is published is (at least I think so) a coded monologue with the poet addressing himself, no outsiders welcome.

I like "The Vanilla Tree" and "Phusis" by Pat Reynolds and "Avalon" by Paul Edwin Zimmer. Barbara Proenza's "The Storyteller" is most atmospheric -- makes you want to start lecturing on stranger-danger. Angelee Sailer Anderson's "Visitation" has great lines, but could do with some editing, principally excising some of the adjectives which detract from the poem's momentum.

I won't mention others, since space is limited, except to say that I found no coded monologues and I shall re-read them all with pleasure.

Stories: Mindy Bergner's "The Man of the Billion Words" has potential. I think she has two stories going here, and the element with the most potential for humor and originality is the limitation of words bit. Escapes from the giant's/monster's/witch's/etc. castle have been done many times.

Paul Rucker's "The Last Card" is a goodie. Mr. Rucker, if you made up your two versions of the tarot, you've got the imagination to bring something fresh and original to your stories. But even if you didn't make that tarot up, you used it well; and I would like to see more stories about it.

I didn't find the Bloddeuwedd character very plausible. It seemed to me that she should have been both more peculiar as one of the sidhe and more passive, so that she would contrast more

with the tarot-reading witch, who really is the female lead in this piece. Also, you use the word doppelganger, which is German (I'm pretty sure), not Celtic, and therefore out of place in this very Celtic tale.

Such quibbles aside, I enjoyed the story. I'm looking forward to the next issue of Mythic Circle.

Melanie A. Rawls
Thomasville, Georgia

I have somewhat mixed feelings about Mythic Circle #3; on one hand I really liked the issue; I especially enjoyed the artwork (terrific cover and a wonderful series of drawings by Tim Callahan) and the poetry, but on the other hand there were several stories just seemed interminable to me. I can't understand why you would print Tales of the Attondar; I kept reading, hoping the story would redeem itself somewhere along the way and take an original turning, but much to my dismay it continued as a Silmarillion rip-off, and a cliff one at that. I guess I don't understand (first) why somebody would re-write Tolkien and (secondly) why you would print it.

I found The Good Folk simply unbelievable; would these folks really take a corner off their kitchen, even with McManus promising to pay for repair if it didn't work? Wouldn't somebody want a bond or guarantee of some sort? I realize this is fantasy but it's still got to be in the realm of comprehension!

As for The Last Card, I found it a rather long telling of a fairly simple tale which, nonetheless, required re-reading in parts because his meaning was unclear. On a purely personal basis (versus an objective critique) I was put off by the author's blatant anti-Christian slant; as for Holy Water having no power over the Sidhe, perhaps Mr. Rucker doesn't know that covers on baptismal fonts were instituted to keep folks from stealing Holy Water for use in black magic and pagan rituals... But as I indicated, that's a personal reaction.

Archie's Game reminded me, in a small way, of Aesop! A tasty little morsel. The Man Of The Billion Words was another story that required some careful re-reading: it escaped me the first time that Jon lost his language once more after his son re-appeared; I also had to search backward to learn just how old his son really was. The escape from the giant was confusing -- that sort of action can be difficult to describe in adequate detail without slowing the pacing. I guess I liked the idea but wasn't thrilled by the execution.

I do find the letters column insightful -- sometimes I think, "Right on!" and sometimes I wonder what planet the LOC'er came from but I suppose that's just humanity at work. Looking over this

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letter you'll probably think I've been too harsh. Still, I hope the various authors will listen to what's valuable for them and forget the rest. To Lynn and Christine I offer my thanks for doing a fine job (despite the typos) -- I'm sure it's a lot of work.

Frances Garland
Miles City, Montana

You say you liked the issue?! Boy, are you strict! As for "rewriting Tolkien," if you look at Sword of Shanara and Thomas Covenant (etc.) you'll see that there's some pretty tasty \$\$ to be made off of those sorts of "rewrites." As to why we printed Attondar, the story was submitted to us like any other and we decided it was sufficiently well-written that it deserved reader feedback, some of which you've just provided (thank you). You'll note that Attondar has been mentioned in every LOC thus far, so it certainly did elicit responses.

It seems that you criticize The Good Folk for being skimpy on explanations and The Last Card as being long -- you really are strict!

Well, you put out another fine issue! I loved the illo for my poem. I also really enjoyed the letter column -- I think it's a terrific way for writers to get feedback. I wish more magazines would do the same!

Much thanks to Jane Yolen and Joe R. Christopher for their help with my poetry. I've had no formal training in it --not even the stuff they teach you in high school!-- and I know I sometimes have problems with meter. Joe especially helped me to clear up quite a few metrical puzzles!

To Pat Reynolds: I was using the trees from Robert Graves' THE WHITE GODDESS in "Battle of the Trees." Holly-god (or king) was ascendant in the winter; Alder was the tree-symbol of Bran. The May Queen was either Olwen (Hawthorn) or Creiddylad, for whom the two tree-knights battle eternally every May Day. (P.S. I loved your poem, "The Vanilla Tree").

To Lee Beasley: Ilmenaur was the main character in the KING OF THE FOMORS GRANDSON. Baranek was the "cause" of the story rather than its principle character, though he has a large and important part.

To Gwyneth E. Hood: Interesting, that you thought KING/FOMORS deserved a longer treatment. This story actually comes from a long series of tales set in the land of Essarnadon. Three of these tales are novel-length; I'm working on the final draft of book #1 right now.

About the stories in #3: One small complaint -- not as many stories as in #2!

THE GOOD FOLK: Interesting, though I thought Molly and her husband a little too accepting about what was happening to them. Maybe the weird occurrences should

have been even weirder? I live in an old house, and it would not be that unusual for the plumbing to go wild or chunks of plaster to fall! I liked the author's clear writing style very much, though.

ARCHIE'S GAME: A very pleasing little folktale. Well told!

THE MAN OF THE BILLION WORDS: I enjoyed this tale very much, as it used traditional folkloric material. However, I wondered what was the significance of the witch at the end; she threw a ball of fire at Jon then vanished. I couldn't quite figure out her purpose, as Jon was swiftly brought back to life.

THE MULBERRY was my favorite story this issue. I liked Charles' poem, "dog days gone," too. Keep up the excellent work, Charles!

I also enjoyed THE LAST CARD because of its Celtic subject matter (perfect for my own 'zine!!!!). To be a nitpicker, though, there was one line I felt should have been clearer. It's in paragraph three. It compares the wail of women to the 'cursed Ban-Sidhe'. I think the author intends the wail to resemble the wailing of the Ban-Sidhe, not the faerie woman herself. (Like I said before, just a very minor quibble!) I liked your poems, too, Lynn; especially "Gift."

Well, I guess I'd best stop now, ere this letter becomes a novel!

Janet P. Reedman
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

I'm soooo glad that Mythic Circle is doing its job and you found the readers' critical comments HELPFUL!!! Nevermind the fact that these particular readers (and, in fact, quite a large portion of our readership) are professionals - authors, professors, editors. Perhaps that should be a selling point for Mythic Circle - "Get yer good kriteeks here!" As for your complaint about fewer stories, well, #3 was a poetry-intensive issue and we can't afford to go over 50 pgs (fiscal realities, don'tcha know).

Brutally fired, savagely abused, painfully digging herself out of the slough of despair by her fingertips, yours truly finds herself up to her neck in a stack of UNFINISHED BUSINESS and INCOMING MAIL. Pouring a pot of coffee down her throat, and lighting the MIDNIGHT OIL LAMP, she heaves a GREAT SIGH, battles down the overwhelming desire to shove her head under a pillow and howl for a while, and dispatches of EVIL PAPERWORK one page at a time, beginning with the bills on the top.

Slowly, ever so slowly, the stack dwindles as the NIGHT WEARS ON. Weary, but insistent, yours truly persists, item by item, slowly, ever so slowly, not quite apace with the steady burning of oil and steady dimming of desire.

Then SUDDENLY----BUT WHAT'S THIS?? COULD IT BE??? A MYTHIC CIRCLE, TWO-THIRDS DOWN THE PILE !!! OH BLESSED RELIEF !!!! OH JOYOUS TIME-OUT !!!! AN UNINTERRUPTED EXCURSION INTO WONDERFUL WORLDS OF CREATIVE OBLIVION!!! SUDDENLY HERE I SIT CUDDLED IN A QUILT ON THE COUCH, HAVING TRADED BITTER COFFEE FOR A STEAMING MUG OF SPICED APPLE CIDER. AH, A BREAK, A BREAK. AH, RESCUED FROM MY WORK, RESCUED FROM MY DRUDGERY, RESCUED AT LAST FROM THE OBLIGATIONS AND UNANSWERED LETTERS, RESCUED TO CURL UP AND SIMPLY, SIT, NOTHING TO DO BUT INDULGE IN FICTIONAL FANTASIES AND--- AND ---

Oh *&# ! Rescue? Relief? A short-lived illusion. If I know these guys, THEY'LL NOT LET ME REST TIL I LOC ! ! ! !

Loved MC#3. "The Good Folk" reminded me of a "Moonlighting" episode, but was a nice simple story simply told. "Archie's Game" was memorable and clever but I'd edit out the framing device and tighten up the rest. As I enjoyed "Tales of the Attondar" for its people, its atmosphere, and its evocative syntax but found myself longing for a more engaging narrative. Okay, Joe, what's a "clerihew" ??? I enjoyed the fine illos for "The Last Card" as much as the story itself.

THERE.

My duty done, I'll sleep much better. But first it's back to the COFFEE and STIFF HIGH-BACK CHAIR and ONE FULL THIRD of a pile of UNFINISHED BUSINESS and UNANSWERED LETTERS and I HAVE PROMISES TO KEEP AND MILES TO GO BEFORE I SLEEP, AND MILES TO GO BEFORE I SLEEP.

Diana Lynne Pavlac
Chicago, Illinois

P.S. -- the editorial is my favorite part of Mythic Circle

((Okay, gentle readers, here you see an example of blatant EDITOR STROKING (especially that post script; that's the real kicker). But does it make us cynical or suspicious of her motives? Noooo. It gets her printed in the letterCol. Just watch, next she'll be wanting us to print her thesis...))

Gee, thanks for the LOC, Diana. Never knew we provided such blessed relief (AND HIGH DRAMA !!!) but hey, we try to oblige...

Thank you for publishing my poem, "Hild", in Mythic Circle #3. It was nice to see it in print. Unfortunately, the last three quatrains of the central section got somewhat garbled and reduced to one quatrain - combining the first two lines of the first and the last two lines of the second - and a three line stanza. What was printed read:

Men hacked and hewed as beasts that rend.
Father and Lover brought death to each other,
Against their hate her anguish strove,
But vengeance stood in reason's stead.

At dawn, again the sword did rend.
Ax bit bone. Spear drank blood.
Hedin and Hogni fell in spear-storm flood.

It should have read:

Men hacked and hewed as beasts that rend.
Father and Lover brought death to each other,
As at World's Doom brother slays brother.
All lay silent at the day's end.

Grieving Hild life-spells wove,
Hedin and Hogni raised from the dead.
Against their hate her anguish strove,
But vengeance stood in reason's stead.

At dawn again the sword did rend.
Ax bit bone. Spear drank blood.
Hedin and Hogni fell in spear-storm flood.
...Hild raised corpses at the day's end.

This should clarify the poem's meaning for
anyone who couldn't make sense of those
stanzas as printed.

Tim Callahan
Pasadena, California

*Well, gosh darn it! This is embarrassing
as all get out. I pulled up the computer
file and, sure enough, I'd condensed two
quatrains into one. But it also served as
a learning experience, as the printer
driver I've been using deleted every line
that started with a period (or series of
periods) -- the driver reads that as a
"dot command!" Neither Christine nor I
caught that condensation and, as one can't
really expect folks to go and correct
their copies of MC3, we are running the
poem again in its entirety (and I'll make
sure the printer-driver doesn't go
bonkers!).*

Herewith find three dollars for Issue
Four. Perhaps next year I will break down
and subscribe for a full year; I hesitate
because, as I said in my initial inquiry,
I'm tired of zines that take my money and
fold after the next issue.

So, Issue Three was late only a month
or so. In fandom circles, that's not
considered a bad record. The quality of
this one equaled the last--artwise, it
surpassed Number Two. The cover was
gorgeous! A feel of primavera in autumn,
and I liked your choice of cover-color.

Best of the contents were the poems
and the illos to those poems. It's so
hard to find fantasy poetry printed
anywhere! What amazes me is the talent
you've got here! I was drooling over Tim
Callahan's art, and then I came across his
poem "Hild." Wow! Now I'm wondering if
Angelee Anderson, whose work is something
I'm beginning to look forward to when I
get your magazine, draws as well? "Hild"

and "Visitation" were my favorites, but I
liked all the poetry. The clean, archaic
and deceptively simple feel to Zimmer's
pieces; the breathtaking lilt of Reynolds'
"Phusis" (wherefrom that name?) and both
the pieces by Lynn, though "Gift" was the
one that appealed strongest.

For the fiction: my favorite was
"Archie's Game." It resonated very
strongly indeed. I could have wished for
more careful word choice, but the impact
was good. Bergner's "Man of the Billion
Words" grabbed me next. Great premise --
lots of humor and action. The end was a
bit breakneck, I thought, but it left me
wanting to see more by this author. I was
glad to see another off-beat, charming yet
puzzling piece by Rampp. I can imagine
that he has a tough time finding homes for
his stories -- what a shame when editors
of bigger magazines won't take a risk.
It's stories like his that give fantasy
its intrigue.

Rucker is either very young, or a
one-draft author. His story was fast-
paced and fun, and I loved what he did
with the tarot, but there was muddiness in
character motivations and in background
detail. Paul, don't fall into the all-too-
common cliché of some of today's neo-pagan
writers: "Plain-wrap Celts!" You've got
too much talent.

Though, at least Rucker told his own
story. The Sarah Beach piece read like a
pleasantly pasteurized version of THE
SILMARILLION. What feeling (or depth) the
story might have had was so overshadowed
by the original that this never got beyond
a somewhat shallow echo. I wonder if
Beach was told by some well-meaning
creative writing teacher: "Model yourself
on the masters!" Side question: is this
the same Sarah Beach who -- I just double-
checked to make sure the names are the
same -- wrote a grand-slam against Dennis
McKiernan's IRON TOWER trilogy in the
sample issue of MYTHPRINT I was sent last
winter? If so, I sense a case of pot and
kettle here! Beach's use of language,
despite awkward constructions in the
archaic forms and some over-used
descriptive phrases, is adept enough that
I'd like to exhort her to try her hand at
her own vision.

"The Good Folk" also had problems,
the main one being it didn't quite tell a
complete story. Nice start, but my
interest flagged in the long time it took
for the couple figure out what seemed
really obvious. The pace picked up in
McManus' history but then the whole thing
became improbable and flattened out. I
would have had the couple enter into a
spirited bargain with McManus, and taken
it from there. Connelly had lots of
promising elements, but didn't make use of
them.

A good issue, all told; I also
enjoyed the Letters of Comment. I might
wish, though, that a writer would not use
the excuse of having published
professionally for not standing behind any
words that she or he has written. A
salute to Jane Yolen for her upfront

response, pro-status notwithstanding.
Looking forward to Number Four!

Mary-Edith Bridges
Seattle, WA

We have every intention of continuing with this project for some time yet to come (years, I hope). STILL, your observation of disappearing 'zines is accurate enough and very understandable: Christine & I aren't getting paid for this puppy; this is time we could apply to other endeavors (many of them PAYING endeavors) and, just like the rest of humanity ('zine editors included), we can't see around the corner ahead of us. A time may come when one or the other of us might have to drop out for any number of reasons and --hopefully-- Mythic Circle would continue, but (to quote Safeway Goya of The Nobody's) "No guarantees in the western world." So, if you have a history of subscribing to 'zines just before they fold, maybe you should continue to purchase MC on a single-issue basis?!

Yeah, Tim Callahan's a great talent and I think MC will prove to be a future-collector's item based on the generous number of illos, poems, and/or stories he provides for us. I believe that Paul Rucker is young (under 20) and I trust your comments (and Pat Reynolds') re: generic celtic will be received in the right light; he is definitely talented, with both art and language skills, and I too would like to see those abilities

CLEO

by
Judith B. Jones

Cleo, the cat, was dying of the mange. She signaled her distress by making forlorn mews. She curled her limber whiteness into a half moon atop an old chenille bathrobe, in a box by the downside of the cellar steps. Cleo was Em's cat. Em was a twelve year old child-woman betwixt both. She was still a girl and yet womanhood whispered and beckoned her into the future.

Cleo was many times a mother, a veteran guardian of numerous litters of kittens gone now into good homes.

Em squatted beside the ailing cat and stroked her head and neck. The cat's eyes, usually green, wore an opaque shield of illness. Her nose was dry. Her mouth sagged open ever so slightly. She panted. In the dark basement her sounds filled the damp corners and Em's heart.

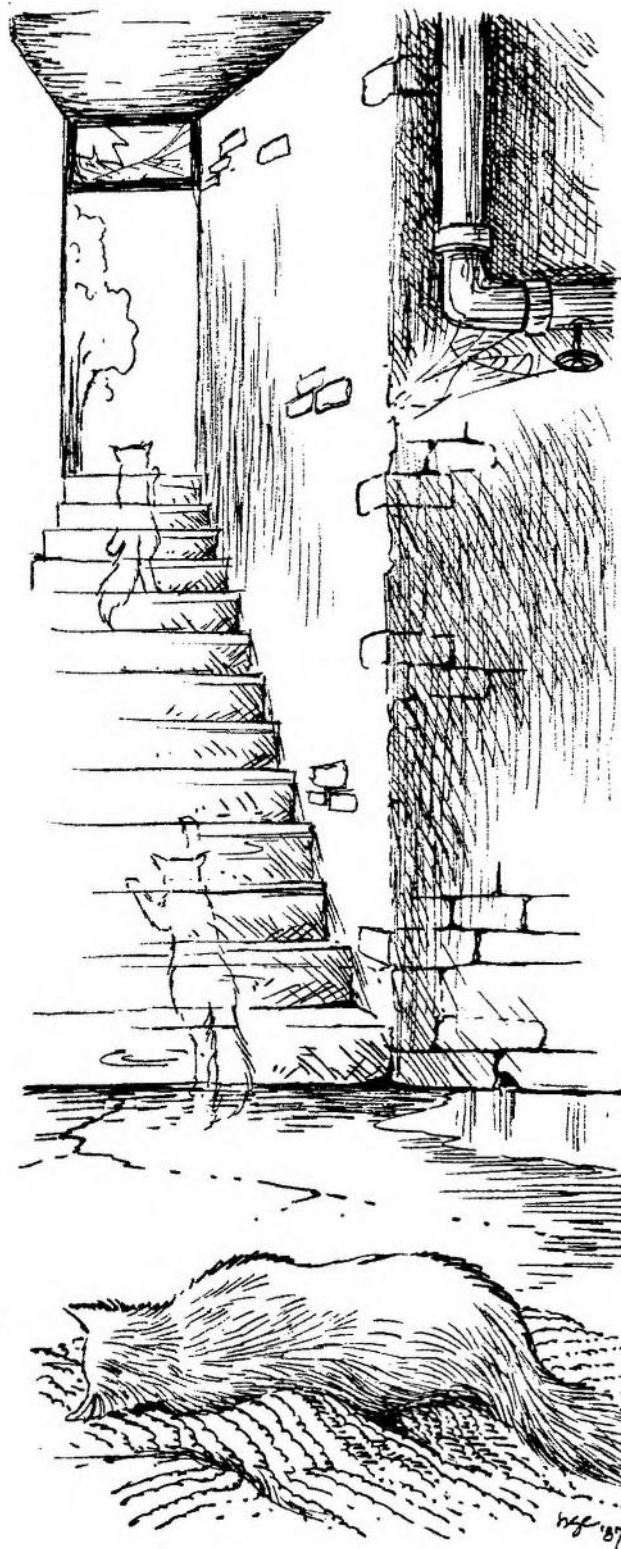
Em's voice was barely audible. She said, "I know you're hurting in your body, just like me once when I had the Nephritis. I don't have any medicine to make it stop. I will tell you a story. Listen good now."

"Once there was a beautiful cat. Her body was covered with downy fur and her eyes

developed further. You listening, Paul? Give us more submissions!

As for Sarah Beach, yes, she is one and the same. In her defense, though, I can acknowledge that it's very hard to maintain perspective on your own work. We tend to be either too harsh or too indulgent and balance, like all growth, takes time.

THANKS TO ALL OUR LETTER WRITERS!
YOU'RE ALL STARS IN OUR BOOK!



were green...like young apples from Grandpa's farm. In her heart this cat knew how to listen. She heard jays scolding in the yard out back. She listened to crickets and mice scampering in the pantry.

And best of all she listened to young girls. She kept all their secrets. She never left in the night when shadowy things moved in and out of slumbering bedrooms. She warmed cold feet and sang lullabies in purring harmony.

Then she grew sick and lost her fleeting speed. Some of her hair dropped off and what stayed on was dirty and drab. She couldn't eat and only her eyes remembered the dancing days of summers gone. She was not dead but dying, wanting to leave, to hurry on.

"Do you understand?" Em asked.

The cat lay frozen in her misery. She uttered smaller mews, pleas to her mistress.

She had done as her dad said: "Better to chloroform her than have her suffer."

Em took the chloroform and poured some onto an old white sock. She pressed the sock over Cleo's nostrils. The cat let go... her life darted across the basement floor and up the stairs and away. Her body sank into her chenille bed and Em knew she was dead. The pain left the cat for good. Em buried her in the yard.

Shortly afterwards Em watched her own green eyes become opaque, lost in the last days of summer. She felt afraid as shadows moved in her room at night. And then her body ushered in the first pains of new illness. She dreamed of white socks and girls who couldn't run and play. Em didn't tell her father of her pain lest he decide she must not be left to suffer, either. Em lay frozen in her misery. Her mind called out in the refuge of her room.... "Cleo...Cleo... listen to me now...I will tell you a story. Once there was a beautiful girl. Her eyes were green like young apples from Grandpa's farm..."

Em took to spending long periods of time in her room talking to the memory of her now-

dead cat. She retraced her steps again and again, from the door to the window. Her conversations became whispers. All the while the empty place inside of her grew larger. The pains were frequent. Her appetite was small. Her mother coaxed her to take the pale foods...milk, eggs, potatoes, pudding, custard. Her father stared at her during dinner. He raised his napkin to his lips and cleared his throat frequently. Em avoided her father. She forced herself to smile when he raised his head and sent searching looks in her direction. Surely he knew she was not well. She ate her food and threw it back up in the bathroom at the end of the hall. Droplets of sweat ran down her forehead as she wiped her mouth with the white wash rag. Her fear chased her into the cool darkness of her bedroom where for the first time she cried real tears for herself and her cat.

One evening Em heard her father's step on the stairs. He tapped lightly on her door. She clutched her pillow in the dark. He opened the door and turned on the ceiling light. Em blinked her eyes to reject the intrusion of light. Her father had something cradled in his arms. He placed a small black kitten on her pillow. It mewed and purred at the same time. Em felt the touch of downy fur against her face. She almost laughed. Her father padded out of the room and closed the door. Em cuddled the healthy new kitten against her. There would be plenty of time. This cat was going to stay with her forever and ever. She was suddenly hungry, ravenous in fact. Her father had looked pale, she thought. His pants were sagging in the back now. Her mother was encouraging him to eat more but he shook his head, complained of nausea and headache. Em smiled. The white powder from their basement mixed in easily with his oatmeal. Every morning she mixed it in when she helped her mother in the kitchen. Oatmeal was her specialty. It was the only dish she knew how to make. Em cuddled the kitten to her and went to the kitchen to get it some milk. Her pain was gone. She walked quietly past her father's room. His light was out. The only sound in the house was the kitten purring against Em's chest.

The Letter Gods

by
Stefan Bilandic

Blows rang out. Jimmy and Billy were fighting. Jimmy was much bigger but Billy hung on like a tiger.

Words rang out. Jimmy and Billy were calling each other names between blows. Not very nice names, either.

Steps rang out. Jimmy and Billy had a father, and he was advancing down the hall. They stopped fighting, and quickly.

"What is the meaning of this?"

Father was a lawyer, and he liked to talk like one. "You should be ashamed of what you called each other."

Jimmy knew he shouldn't be picking on his little brother, and he hung back with

shame. Billy's eyes became bright, as he knew what was going to happen. Father gave Jimmy a spanking, and Billy was glad it wasn't him.

Red all over, Jimmy stalked off to his room. Just before he slammed the door, he called out one final snip. "God you...!"

"Yes?"

Jimmy turned around suddenly and saw a man sitting on his bed. The man looked like he might be one of Father's friends, wearing a business suit, and he smiled.

"Who are you?" asked Jimmy.

The man smiled again. "I am God U."

"God who?"

The man looked like he was thinking what blockheads little boys were. "Not God Who, God U."

Jimmy just stared at the man. Is he crazy? he thought.

"There are twenty-six gods, one for each letter," explained the man. "I am God U. You summoned me. Just a moment ago."

Jimmy still looked blank. Am I crazy? he thought.

"You called out 'God U!' and I came, as I was instructed to do."

Now Jimmy realized how the man had come. "What do I do with you?"

"I am God U, the God of petty disputes and minor bickerings, like the one you just had with your brother."

Jimmy didn't know what those big words meant, but he nodded his head.

Perhaps the man sensed Jimmy's doubt. He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a piece of white paper. "My card," he explained, and handed it to Jimmy.

Jimmy saw those same big words on the card. It also said something about "Office 21, Heaven Building." But Jimmy didn't really look at that. He put the card in his pocket.

"Would you like to meet some of the other gods?" said the man, changing the subject.

"I guess so," said Jimmy. He began to be curious. "May I see God J for Jimmy?"

"Here I am," said a voice.

Jimmy turned around and saw another man coming in and closing the door behind him. "Hello," said Jimmy.

"I am God J," said God J, "the God of Birds."

Jimmy looked at God J and saw that he was wearing khaki attire, like a birdwatcher Jimmy now recalled having met once. I guess there really are gods, he thought.

"Jimmy!" called a fierce voice behind him.

Jimmy turned around (I'm tired of turning around, he thought) and saw God U and, next to him, a fierce-looking man in a soldier's uniform. "I am God W," said the fierce man. "That's Double-U. That means I'm twice as bad as God U. No minor bickering here. I am the God of War!" And he raised his hand threateningly.

Jimmy covered his eyes in terror. "Make them go away!" he screamed.

When Jimmy opened his eyes again, God W was not there. Neither was God J. Only God U, who sat on the bed, smiling. "Now: what may I do for you?" said God U.

"I don't know," admitted Jimmy.

"Oh dear," sighed the man. "This happens all the time. You did not really call me, did you? You said, 'God you,' not 'God U.'"

Jimmy nodded his head yes.

"I am not happy," said God U.

Jimmy nodded his head.

The man stood up and suddenly knocked Jimmy to the floor. Jimmy got right back up, but God U was not to be seen.

"Jimmy," said a voice behind him.

Jimmy shrugged and turned around.



There, in the doorway, was his father. "You fell out of bed," declared his father.

Jimmy looked at his bed, but the covers were not rumpled. No trace of where God U had been sitting could be seen. Neither Jimmy nor his father noticed a small white card that had fallen out of the boy's pocket.

"Then he wasn't here?" Jimmy said dubiously.

"Who wasn't here?"

"God U."

"Jimmy!" said Father in an angry voice. "Don't talk like that."

"Yes, Father."

"Now turn off the light and go back to bed." The father closed the door and left the room. He decided that he didn't understand little boys.

Jimmy, meanwhile, picked up God U's calling card and felt it thoughtfully. He had it one better. He decided that he didn't understand gods.

PAYING THE PIPER

by
Janet P. Reedman

A lady dwelt under a hollow hill, inside a stone womb raised by an ancient people who had intended it to represent the woman's ever-fruitful womb. Pale-faced and arrogant, her hair corn-gold and her eyes deep and devouring, she sat on a block of moon-quartz, admiring herself in a mirror of polished bronze. In this incarnation she called herself Modron, though the names she bore were many.

Suddenly Modron ceased her preening in the mirror and looked toward the low doorway that lead to her chamber in the heart of the hill. There, leaning against a massive stone upright, was a tall, pale man wearing garb of a woodland hue. Red hair crackled on his shoulders, and his lips bore a cruel haughty smile, as did Modron's. A shadow of antlers darkened the air above his flaming head.

"Mabonwy!" The lady rose in a rush of crimson robes and went to him, setting her long hands on his shoulders.

"Lady Mother of Earth." The man gazed down at the white-cheeked woman, his Mother and his Divine Consort, bound to him by a primeval law that heeded not the fears and taboos of mortals. "How goes it with you?"

"It goes ill!" She whirled away from him, casting her mirror against the wall. "Do you not see, Mabonwy? I grow old! Silver streaks my golden locks and my face is lined! Aye, and it is not even wintertime, when such a change would be proper and right."

Mabonwy clutched her wrists. "You look fair to me. Have no fear."

"You fool!" she snapped. "To you I look fair, aye, for your plight is the same as mine! You, too, fade, my son-lover! Where are the hunting temples raised to you of yore? They lie broken 'neath the peat: forgotten shrines to a nigh-forgotten god!"

"Well, what would you have me do?" Mabonwy released Modron's wrists and folded his arms across his chest. "In these evil years the people follow the Christos, God of the Fish, and heed not the old ways."

Modron sighed. "We need blood, you and I, as we had of old. It kept us young. When people ceased to fear, they ceased to sacrifice and then to believe. Mabonwy, you must find us a willing sacrifice!"

Mabonwy's brows lifted. "I told you, they worship the Christos..."

Modron looked at him darkly. "Not all do, you know that, else we would

have vanished from the earth! Some folk still half-believe, albeit they no longer offer, and some pay only lip service to the Christos. Surely you must know that even today barren wives touch my Sacred Stones hoping to become fertile."

Mabonwy nodded. "Say no more, Mother Goddess. You have convinced me. I shall fare into the mortal world and seek a sacrifice."

"You must not be obvious, though," said Modron. "You do not want the black crow-men of the Christos to toss poison-water at you. You may have to resort to trickery to get the sacrificial victim."

"I am no fool, Lady Mother," said Mabonwy, smiling unpleasantly. He lifted his pan-pipes from his belt. "Mortals are always desperate--weak, short-lived beings that they are--and there will always be one willing to make--a deal."

"Farewell, then," said Modron. Her face, though hot and eager, suddenly looked old, taut, haggard. "Do not return until you have wet the stones of one of my Sacred Sites with blood."

Mabonwy came to Clun village in the middle of a violent rainstorm.

Lightning tore the sky and the earth trembled, as he entered the ill-defended compound, his lean frame wrapped in an oily skin cloak, his crafty, arrogant face hidden by a fold of his hood.

He drew attention at once. A score of thin, ragged people tumbled from their ramshackle cots to gawk at the stranger.

They seemed hideous to Mabonwy, five thousand years old and clad in the guise of a youthful man. Old, wretched and broken, the folk were bent by lives of deficiency and hard toil as a tree limb is bent by continual blasts of wind. Even the women were grotesque, toothless and wan, worn out before thirty by constant childbearing.

"Who are you?" asked the headman, a wizened greybeard with phlegmy cough. "Why have you come? Are you from the King?" The men behind him muttered, and waved filthy pitchforks in a menacing fashion.

Mabonwy held out his hands. "No kingsman am I, good folk," he said. "My name is Mabon Piper, and I am a wandering minstrel."

"Wandering minstrel? Hah!" cried an uncharacteristically burly fellow. "No one travels this land alone in these

times, stranger. I say you're a spy sent from the bloody king. And we don't like spies here--we lynch 'em!"

"Do you not believe I am a minstrel?" cried Mabonwy angrily. "I will play for you, then!" He reached beneath his cloak and drew out his pan-pipes. Raising them to his lips, he played a haunting melody that recalled the events of ancient times: Lithe dark people dancing in the firelight; farmers tilling the warm, rich soil; gold-decked chiefs passing under stone doorways that framed the rising sun; a cold moon floating over a stone standing near the cremation of a mother and child...

Mabonwy stopped playing. The villagers were huddled together, weeping, their pitchforks fallen from their hands.

"You are a sorcerer!" gasped the headman.

"No." Mabonwy veiled his dark eyes with his lashes. "I am not. I'm but a skillful piper come seeking shelter for a day or two."

"Why have you come to humble Clun? You are so talented you could play at the court of the king himself!"

"The king's court is not for me," lied Mabonwy. "I must wander this land playing for ordinary folk like yourselves. That is the penance set upon me by the Bishop of Canterbury, for a wicked sin I committed in my youth."

"The Bishop set you out wandering? You're a Christian, then, and not a sorcerer?" The headman eyed Mabonwy warily.

Mabonwy held up a medallion he wore: a lopsided cross fashioned from river reeds and bound with threads of Modron's hair. "Look--here is my Christos cross." He did not tell them the cross was a sacred symbol long ere their Christ-man died on one.

The villagers looked relieved. The headman smiled brokenly. "Then you are welcome here, master. Come into my hut and play for us again!"

Inside the hut Mabonwy played. His melodies were sweet, by far the loveliest sounds the villagers had ever heard, and they wept in both joy and sorrow. Mabonwy watched them as he piped, scanning them with cold, glittering merciless eyes. There had to be one...

His gaze fell upon a young woman who sat rapt, her mouth gaping, her blue eyes dripping tears. She cradled a small child that looked ill unto death in her scrawny arms.

Setting his pipe aside, he spoke in a voice deceptively gentle. "My dear woman, what ails your child?"

The girl started. "You be speaking to me, sir?" she asked shyly, pushing back strands of greasy brown hair that flopped over her face.

"Yes, my dear. What is wrong with your babe?" He leaned over, touching the child's brow with long, slender fingers. The infant, a boy of about

two, moved sleepily and moaned. Its flesh burned beneath Mabonwy's touch.

"Don't know, sir," said the girl.

"He's been sickly ever since birth. Has rickets, for one thing--but there's more besides. The leech think he's not long for this world..." She bowed her face into the child's sparse hair and sobbed harshly.

Mabonwy, his cruel gaze shaded by his long lashes, knelt beside her and clasped her hand. "Surely you do not grieve, my dear! Know you not that the soul of your child will fly at death to the very arms of the Christos?"

"So the priests say," replied the girl, "but alas! I'm a wicked sinner, and don't want my son to go to heaven where I can't see him no more. He's the only child I have, you see, Master Piper, for my poor man died of a rotted foot and I'll not wed another. God, I'd do anything to see my Kilian well!"

Mabonwy smiled, a smile that did not quite reach his unearthly eyes. "Lady, I know a little of healer-craft," he said, "and I believe your child can be treated. Unfortunately, no healing can take place here in Clun--the, ah, conditions are not right."

"You just held out hope to me, then snatched it back!" the girl pouted.

"Caristiona!" someone reprimanded her. "Don't be rude!"

"I'm sorry," she muttered.

"There's no need to apologize; I am not angry at you. There was a misunderstanding on your part. You thought that I snatched hope from you, when I was actually suggesting you accompany me to foreign parts to find healing for your child."

Caristiona's face brightened. "Do you mean it, sir?"

"Of course!" He stood up, hands outstretched. Healing your child would help me atone for the wrongs I committed in youth. And I would fain serve unto eternity the Lord of Lords and his Blessed Mother." He smirked at his own blend of lies and truth.

"So be it, then," said Caristiona. "When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow," said Mabonwy, thrusting his pipe into his belt. "At the first light of dawn."

The next day dawned cold and rainy. Mabonwy and Caristiona moved slowly through the damp grayness, mist swirling about them, muffling the sound of Caristiona's soft weeping as she left the only place she's ever known.

Irritated by her tears and the piteous whining of the child strapped to her back, Mabonwy snapped, "Why are you sniveling, woman? You're on your way to save your son!"

"I'm glad of that," said Caristiona, "yet I'm afraid, master. What if I die on the journey and never see my mam again? But maybe if I pray hard...Mam gave me her cross which has been in the family since St. Augustine came to Britain." She reached around

her neck and drew from her baggy kirtle an ugly iron cross. "Mam said I could use this to pay you, sir, if and when Kilian's healed. It's the only valuable object the family owns."

Mabonwy, a true lord of Faery and a hater of iron, recoiled in horror from the cross. "Put it away!" he snarled.

Caristiona looked hurt. "but you--you're a Christian!"

"Put it away, I say!" Mabonwy's face twisted with revulsion--and pain, for the cold sheen of the iron hurt him. "'Tis no relic, you simple wench! St. Augustine, indeed! Some country smith banged it out for a couple of coppers, I'll wager! Hide it! I'd be ashamed to pray to my god on such a tawdry thing."

Head bowed, Caristiona thrust the cross into her pocket. Then she trudged slowly at Mabonwy's boot heels, her own bare feet slipping in the mud.

By the end of the day they reached a ruined hillfort. Where torches had once glowed and warriors feasted, there were only burnt timber and lumpy earthen mounds. Caristiona squatted amid the ruins and nursed her child, while Mabonwy stalked hither and thither, his eyes full of memories. "This place is haunts," whispered Caristiona as the sun set behind the green hills and a huge orange moon rose like an eye in the West. "Can't you feel it, lord?"

"Aye. A great slaughter took place here long ago. Beneath your very feet, woman, lie a hundred youths slain by the Romans. Some still have ballistae lodged in their bones." Gloomily he turned from the gawking girl. The Romans were first to bring trouble to his kind: killing the druids, burning the sacred oak groves, melding the old deities with effete southern gods.

"We should leave, Master."

Caristiona's voice interrupted his glum thoughts. "Wicked ghosts of unbaptised men might be abroad..."

"Nonsense!" snapped Mabonwy.

"Neither you nor the babe will survive if we proceed. Be quiet, and I'll play my pipes for you."

Caristiona hoisted Kilian onto her shoulder and leaned forward attentively as Mabonwy took out his pipes and played a haunting air, a dirge for the warriors of the fort who had once invoked the name of Mabonwy the Hunter.

Suddenly a figure appeared on the fort's ramparts, wreathed in golden light. A naked woman with flowing locks sat astride a snow-white mare. The woman's brow shown like a star in the gloom.

Caristiona leapt to her feet, crossing herself. "Blessed Mary!" she gasped.

"Epona!" breathed Mabonwy, dropping his pipe. "What brings you here?"

"The folk who once dwelt here were Icenii--horse people," replied the woman. "Thus this hill belongs to me. Your piping awoke me from long sleep, son of

Modron."

"Mary!" Caristiona sprinted toward Epona, the Horse Goddess. "You must be the Blessed Virgin, or--or an angel!"

"Virgin? Never that, stupid mortal!" Caristiona did not hear Epona's words as the goddess leaned down and smote her with a shining hand. Caristiona crumpled on the grass, her babe landing unharmed beside her.

Mabonwy sprang at Epona, clutching her wrist. "Why did you strike her?" he cried. "She is valuable to our kind, Horse Goddess! She or the child will spill blood to the Mother and restore the Old Race, temporarily, to power and youth!"

"I haven't harmed her." Epona glanced at the unconscious woman. "She will wake in a day or two, not knowing what struck her."

"Nonetheless, you have caused a delay I can ill afford!" Green sparks darted from Mabonwy's eyes. "I want atonement, Epona."

"Peace!" cried Epona, alarmed by the menace in the Hunter God's voice. "Although I could argue that the wench got no better than she should, with her babble of virgins and angels, I will give you atonement in the form of two of Epona's wind-swift mares. Riding them, you will re-gain the time lost here at Dun Ro-Ech."

She clapped her hands and two white horses cantered out of the shadows, streaming witchlight from their manes and tails. They approached Mabonwy and bowed their necks to him. "They are fully yours now," said Epona. "They bow their heads in submission to your will."

"So be it," said Mabonwy, stroking milk-pale flanks and neck. "Now go, Lady of Horses, ere you do any more damage in your haste and wrath!"

Epona whirled about, hair haloing her head. She glanced over her shoulder at Mabonwy, lips curved in a vicious smile. "I will go," she said, "but not because I obey your orders. I leave because I cannot abide a fool--and such a desperate, dangerous fool you are, Mabonwy! You play a deadly game."

Mabonwy released her wrist as if her flesh burnt him. "What do you mean, Epona?"

The goddess' mocking smile flashed again as she rode into the night. "A woman's mind is as quick as a tongue of flame," she said. "Remember that, Son of the Mother."

"You prattle foolishly," spat Mabonwy, but his eyes bored into her slim white back till it had vanished into the darkness.

A day later Caristiona awoke with a splitting headache. "Christ," she moaned, clutching her temples, and then, as she reached full wakefulness: "Where's Kilian?"

"I have him." On the ramparts Mabonwy sat with the child on his knee.

Wrapped in magics, fed on the milk of Epona's mares, the sickly infant lay quiet in the god's hold.

"Oh thank you; I must have dozed off." Struggling to her feet, Caristiona retrieved her son. "Foolish me for sleeping! How's me poor babe? Do you need a change of swaddling, love?"

"No time for that!" said Mabonwy. "Time passes all too swiftly. We must reach Kernewyk soon...the Equinox would be an auspicious time."

"Why, sir?" asked Caristiona, strapping Kilian to her back.

"Ask no questions; you would not understand the answers. Come--I have steeds for us."

Meekly Caristiona strode over to one of Epona's mares and straddled it. The beast moved uneasily, disturbed by her heavy mortal weight. Awkwardly, Caristiona clutched its mane. "Is this beast tame, Master?" she asked.

"Of course!" cried Mabonwy impatiently, flinging himself upon his own steed and slamming his heels into its flanks. "I'd not risk having you and the child killed in a fall. You are too important to me."

Together they rode over the desolate countryside. Mabonwy spoke seldom, but Caristiona uttered no complaint, her thoughts all of Kilian's well-being. At length they reached Kernewyk, where sea smote white sands and ghosts of drowned cities appeared in the morning sea mists. There, Mabonwy bore her to the ancient site known as the Men-An-Tol, where a round stone bored through the center by the pounding of an ancient hammer stood before an upright pillar. Dismounting, Mabonwy yanked the weary Caristiona from her steed. "We have reached the place of healing," he announced.

Caristiona rubbed her aching eyes and stared in shock at the Men-An-Tol. "This is an old pagan place!" she cried; "a haunt of dark powers!"

"Silence!" Looming before her, Mabonwy cast back his hood. Antlers were sprouting from his brow. "Know me now for who I am, girl: Mabonwy Ap Modron, lord of the Hunt."

Caristiona covered her mouth with her hands, as Mabonwy snatched Kilian from her back-sling and carried him to the Men-An-Tol, which had begun to vibrate and fill with eerie blue flame. Kneeling, the god passed the child through the centre of the stone as he chanted:

"Men-An-Tol, through which spirits fly,
Heal this child so he will not die,
Heal the sickness of the flesh,
Let his body come afresh;
Death-head lifted from his soul,
Through the womb of Men-An-Tol."

There was a burst of flame and light, and a shriek from Kilian. Then the boy lay shivering but unharmed on the far side of the holed stone.



Mabonwy grabbed him and held him aloft. The child's cheeks glowed with radiant health; his eyes were bright and alive. Strong limbs pummeled the smoky air. Caristiona gasped in awe and tears of joy and relief streaked her cheeks.

Mabonwy thrust Kilian toward her. "See! I have healed your son! You name me and my kind demons, but could your Christos have done this? Your holy book says he heals the sick--but did he heed your prayers and heal your babe?"

Caristiona was speechless, but she fingered the battered crucifix in her pocket. Mabonwy swept forward, enfolding her in his cloak. "Come," he said, "I shall show you that my world is fairer than the heaven of which your priests prattle."

His mantle swirled over her head, then fell away revealing a different landscape filled with awesome and beauteous towers and castles. The Men-An-Tol still stood nearby, but it was surrounded by a glowing, green-clad host. They laughed and sang and called to Caristiona in sweet voices.

Drunkenly the girl staggered toward them, drawn by their eerie singing. They caught her hands and began dancing around the holed stone, their movements

growing frenzied as the stone shivered in its bed. Their pale hands caressed over the dazed Caristiona, giving the undernourished woman the form of a lovely immortal. Warm auburn hair flowed in place of knotted brown locks; slender white limbs replaced thin stalks of arms and legs.

Caristiona gasped in awe, while her dancing comrades tittered.

Mabonwy, watching with a vicious smile, set the girl's child aside and went forth to Caristiona. He caught her in his arms, raised her up, and kissed her fiercely. She leaned creamily against him, hands threaded through his hair. "O let this night last forever!" she whispered ecstatically. "I have grown fair and whole, and you--you are with me, my lord. I want you--now and forever."

"Maybe that is possible." His hands stroked her neck. "But to be my lover, you must give more than your body. Beneath faerie glamour you are still mortal--but I can take the humanity away from you."

"How so?" She leaned against the Men-An-Tol, unclasping her dress and letting it fall.

"You are not a goddess and never will be, but faery women are meet brides for Mabonwy, and the people of Faerie are the ancient dead."

"I must die for you?"

"Yes. First renounce your fish-god, then render up your life."

Caristiona shuddered. "I don't want to die...even though you claim I'll be with you for eternity."

Angrily he clutched her arms. He had not expected any resistance. He had thought her new beauty, and the godlike sensuality he radiated would have pushed her beyond normal reason. "You are an ungrateful wench," he snarled. "I've cured your brat and offered you great gifts--yet you refuse me. I am hurt, and wrathful; I may harm that child..."

"No!" she caught his wrist as he faced Kilian. "Forgive me. I am foolish and selfish...Still weakly human--for now...Here, leave Kilian and come to me. I'll give you what you want, as payment for your noble deeds."

She drew him down in the heap of her clothing. He caressed her and she responded ardently. Glowing opalescent, the faerie host swarmed round, murmuring words Caristiona seemed not to hear:

"Fool, fool! She'll never be one of us.

Never...ever..."

Mabonwy's hands smoothed over Caristiona's throat. So easy to snap such frail bones...He grinned viciously. Soon he and the Mother would have a new lease on life. "Do you renounce your fish-god, Caristiona?" he muttered in her ear. "Will you pay Mabonwy Piper for curing your son?"

The girl shifted uncomfortably, burrowing down into her ragged garb as if trying, for a second, to cling to the shreds of her old life. Then her arms encircled Mabonwy, holding him tightly against her. "Mabonwy Ap Modron," she whispered, "I will pay you indeed."

Smirking, he reached for her throat--but then he screamed in agony and tore himself away. Caristiona shrank back, shivering, as the illusion faded from her body, revealing her natural, wasted form.

Mabonwy screamed again, and far away, under a hill, the Mother who was also a bride wailed hideously, her voice rising in a terrible crescendo of grief. The Hunter god clawed at his back, where the cross-piece of Caristiona's iron crucifix jutted from his flesh. Steaming blood pattered on the ground. "Iron!" he shrieked. "I am undone. O Mother, I am lost!"

Caristiona grabbed Kilian as Mabonwy writhed in death-agonies. Before her very eyes, the god's body shriveled and decayed, becoming a twisted skeleton impaled by an iron cross. The watching faerie emitted a horrid screech, then they and their sorcerous realm vanished, blown out like corpse-candles on the wind. Suddenly it was day on a lonely moor, and Caristiona stood alone, blinking in wan sunlight.

Drawing on her fallen garments, she gingerly plucked her cross from Mabonwy's skeleton. Her eyes were tired, a little sad, and surprisingly wise.

"I suspected it from the first, Mabonwy," she murmured. "I knew you had abnormal powers. But I risked going with you--for Kilian's sake. Mam said I'd have to pay the piper, though--and I have, oh indeed I have. I paid you exactly as you deserved, demon."

Giving the healthy Kilian a hearty squeeze, she looped her trusty iron cross about her neck and began the long journey home.

THE SILVER APPLE BRANCH

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The Love Charm

by
John Patrick Wall

The Gypsy looked at me impatiently.
"What do you come here for, woodwright?"

Frankness was apparently the order of the day. "I wish for you to make a love charm for me."

"And why do you need this charm?" she asked.

"I've fallen in deep love with Rowena, whose father works Lord Theobold's land. I don't believe she even knows I'm alive. I need a charm so that she will love me forevermore."

The Gypsy held out her hand. "Two pieces of silver must cross my palm first. All payments for charms must be given in advance."

"I am not a wealthy man," I said.

"You are not a charity case, either. Cross my palm or don't waste my time."

I put two silver pieces in her hand.

"Very good," she said and bit the coins. She then took out a small bag and began to mix the ingredients in it. "For a love charm to catch a maid one needs lizard's eye, excelsior, pegasus wing, unicorn bone,..."

"Not unicorn horn?" I interrupted.

"No, that is for a fertility potion. Let's see now, white rose petals, dragon ash, light of dawn. Do you know her date of birth?"

"April first," I replied.

"That would be ram's fleece,... sea shell, turtledove heart, and I need one more thing: a lock of her hair."

"I do not have one."

"Do you know nothing of magic?" she looked at me contemptuously.

"No, I don't; that is why I came to you."

"Well, the law of sympathetic magic says that a charm must have something that comes from the person being charmed in order to work. For a love charm nothing less than a lock of her hair will do. I will hold these other ingredients until the time of the full moon next week. If you do not get me a lock of her hair by then I will throw these ingredients away. No refund."

I was crushed. I could not see how I would get a lock of her hair. She wore it long and her family cut their own hair, being too poor to afford the barber.

I was quite sad but I was not willing to give up. The only plan I could think of was to sneak up behind her and cut off a lock of her hair. She came with her mother to the marketplace every Friday, so on that Friday I closed my shop and waited for them to come to the market. When I saw them, I sneaked up behind her and very carefully clipped off a lock of her hair.

She turned around and looked at me, shocked. "Walfryd, why did you do that?"

I turned as red as the moon during a lunar eclipse. "I needed... I needed a

lock of your hair. I love you very much, Rowena, and I wished for the Gypsy to make a love charm so that you would love me, too, but she needed a lock of your hair and, oh, I'm so ashamed!"



She looked at me for a moment and then said, "Walfryd, you are so foolish. You are a good and kind man and I could easily love you. In fact, knowing now how you feel makes me more inclined to do so. But would you not be happier knowing that I loved you for yourself, rather than because of some Gypsy charm?"

I thought upon what she said and let the hair I had taken blow away in the wind. "Rowena, may I talk to your father?"

She smiled shyly and said, "You may." I knew there was no need to go back to the Gypsy.

THE CHRISTMAS WITCH AND THE HALLOWEEN ELF

by Virginia Kroll

The situation at the coven was always troublesome but during October it reached a peak. The rest of the witches were ecstatic, feverishly preparing for Halloween, the high point of their year. One of the members, however, had discovered that conforming to the others' standards was becoming increasingly difficult.

Estella had been under suspicion for quite some time. Her performance of witchy duties was half-hearted at best, and everyone sensed that she complied not out of enjoyment and commitment, but out of mere expectation.

At her first cackling contest, the judges had pronounced her decidedly abnormal. Her voice hadn't risen above a chuckle and, ugh upon ugh! that sweet expression was hopeless!

Estella was known to string garlands out of berries that were intended for brews and fashion wreaths from the leaves that should have been pulverized into concoctions. There was a report that she had used her ration of cornhusks to make braided ornaments instead of refurbishing her broom. Why, the old one still looked rand new; it had scarcely been used!

Indeed, Halloween had become a low priority on her calendar, for in her heart, Estella was a Christmas witch.

Not far away, on the northernmost boundary of the forest, someone else was experiencing similar woes.

Tolefson's work record had just been reviewed, and it was declared inexcusably incompetent by elfin standards. Elves, who valued every second of their time, did not treat lightly any deviation from their demanding schedule. They had proclaimed Tolefson lazy when he was, in fact, marvelously industrious. The trouble was that much of his work had to be done in secrecy.

As time when on, Tolefson found it impossible to adhere strictly to Christmas tasks. A lover of autumn and a fan of its celebrations, Tolefson had begun to

consider himself, lo and behold, a Halloween elf.

Because of his phenomenal "green thumb", Tolefson had long ago been appointed Head Nurseryman. Plants sprung up magically at his touch. His annual crop of pines was unequalled and all was seemingly well until a recent even brought him under scrutiny.

When he was supposed to be pruning evergreens he was caught jumping gleefully into a pile of oak leaves, throwing them into the air with abandon.

"Wasting time so close to Christmas!" The inspector had roared. For his offense, Tolefson lost two days of recreational privileges.

From then on, he was carefully watched. Soon he was discovered making a scarecrow out of a bale of reindeer straw which he had taken without permission from the barns. The Elfin Council had reprimanded him severely, and he was given a final chance to act in accordance with the rules.

For a while, Tolefson was able to cooperate. He stifled his Halloweenish impulses and concentrated on the yuletide chores at hand, at least on the surface. To most observers, he appeared the epitome of elfhood.

Having complete authority over agricultural matters, Tolefson had had ample opportunity to sow his special seeds. He had deftly disguised their existence by allowing them to flourish alternately with rows of holly, poinsettia, and mistletoe. Because the field elves respected Tolefson's uncanny knowledge and trusted his impeccable judgment, they assumed that anything out of the ordinary was part of a botanical experiment. Tolefson was certain that his forbidden crops would never be discovered.

One afternoon as Tolefson labored in the fields, he spotted Avery the Elf Master astride an elk, heading straight toward him.

"I've decided to witness the Holly Harvesting with my own eyes this year," announced Avery.

Tolefson gulped. His moment of exposure was at hand.

"It looks like you've really ..." Avery began, stopping abruptly in mid-sentence when something

caught his eye.

"What is this foreign growth with the mammoth leaves and the oversized orange berries?" he thundered. "If you are trying to improve the holly, you have done miserably! Folks have loved it as it is for generations!"

"I know better than to improve on holly, Sir," Tolefson answered in defense of his gardening expertise.

"Then what exactly is growing from those vines?"

Suddenly, Avery put two and two together.

"Pumpkins! Those are pumpkins!" he roared.

"You dare to waste precious time, space, energy, and soil on frivolous Halloween squash when the rest of us are pouring all our efforts into Christmas preparations!" he screamed, outraged.

Tolefson was ordered to his hut until after Christmas, at which time the Elfin Council would again convene and decide on a suitable punishment.

Tolefson saved them the trouble. Weighing his alternatives and unable to abandon his autumnal passion, he packed his belongings and stole away into voluntary exile.

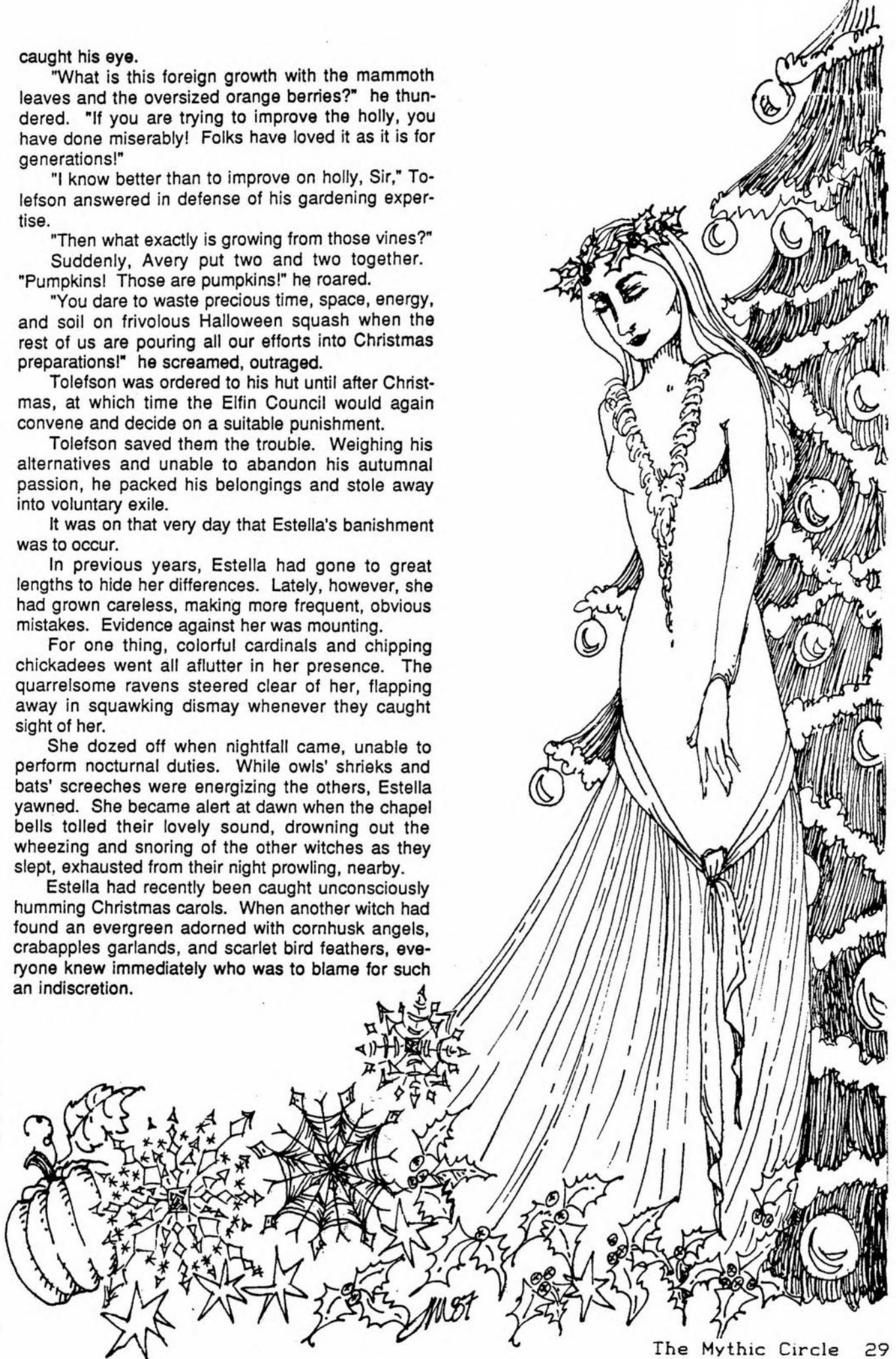
It was on that very day that Estella's banishment was to occur.

In previous years, Estella had gone to great lengths to hide her differences. Lately, however, she had grown careless, making more frequent, obvious mistakes. Evidence against her was mounting.

For one thing, colorful cardinals and chipping chickadees went all aflutter in her presence. The quarrelsome ravens steered clear of her, flapping away in squawking dismay whenever they caught sight of her.

She dozed off when nightfall came, unable to perform nocturnal duties. While owls' shrieks and bats' screeches were energizing the others, Estella yawned. She became alert at dawn when the chapel bells tolled their lovely sound, drowning out the wheezing and snoring of the other witches as they slept, exhausted from their night prowling, nearby.

Estella had recently been caught unconsciously humming Christmas carols. When another witch had found an evergreen adorned with cornhusk angels, crabapples garlands, and scarlet bird feathers, everyone knew immediately who was to blame for such an indiscretion.



The witches had contrived every imaginable potion to correct Estella's behavior, but to no avail. Finally, with their haunting holiday almost upon them, they cast the matter of Estella temporarily aside to perfect every aspect of their Halloween witchcraft.

It came time to review the chants. Estella's turn arrived. She barely paid attention to the task at hand, for her mind kept wandering to thoughts of her favorite holiday. The leaders raised their knobby hands, signaling with gnarled fingers for Estella to begin.

"This is her last chance to redeem her witchly status," she heard one of them say.

Estella climbed atop the tree stump, cleared her throat, and took a deep breath. Then from the depth of her very soul, she bellowed:

"Fa la la la la
La la la la."

That was positively the final straw! The witches were collectively appalled! No potion could change such abominable behavior, no sorcery could correct such intrinsic faults.

"Banish her!" The witches' cry was predictable and unanimous.

And so it happened that Estella was driven from the coven thenceforth and forevermore for intolerable displays unbecoming a witch.

At first, fear held her to the periphery of the forest. After a period of building her confidence she ventured out.

Tolefson, on the other hand, had wasted no time. His decision to leave the elf community was accompanied by a spontaneous rush of relief. No more hiding, no more deception; it was wonderful! Tolefson danced joyfully toward town, eager to celebrate Halloween outwardly and openly at last.

Tolefson built a crude shelter hurriedly on the outskirts of town. There was no time to waste on ornamentation now; Halloween was fast approaching.

Tolefson entered the annual Pumpkin Carving Contest. Because his fingers were artistically deft and helpfully small, his jack-o'-lantern was whittled with such intricacy that the townspeople stared in awe. Nevertheless, the prize was awarded to an established citizen. Something about this newcomer just didn't seem right.

Tolefson applied for a job at Draudt's Market. Even with his inexhaustible knowledge, he was denied employment "for lack of acceptable experience".

When Halloween finally arrived and Tolefson went Trick or Treating, door after unfriendly door was closed in face.

Soon Tolefson sensed that, despite his love of Halloween, despite his intelligence and friendly demeanor, one glance at his elfin features and attire put most people off. As an elf alone just before the holiday season, he was viewed with obvious and immediate distrust. After all, people reasoned, elves belonged with their own kind, frantically preparing for Christmas Eve. Everywhere Tolefson went, he was virtually shunned. Gregarious by nature, he could not cope with being an outcast. In time, he became severely depressed and gravely ill. He took to his

hut, laden with loneliness and drained by despair.

In the abandoned cottage where Estella took up residence, the atmosphere was anything but festive. For centuries, legends had surrounded witches, and these legends dragged behind Estella like a ball and chain. Dark, sinister images popped readily into people's minds, and reaction to Estella was automatically and invariable negative. No one knew about the beauty that bubbled beneath Estella's exterior or the tenderness that tinged her soul. No one bothered to look. True to everyone's expectations, Estella after a time grew haggard, and, in an abysmal state, she, like Tolefson, retired to her cottage.

Suddenly Estella felt a tug at her spirit by an unexplainable force. It nudged her being and prodded her awareness until, wonder of wonders, her despondency was transformed into determination. The Christmas spirit would seep into her every pore and uplift her; she would see to that.

Estella crept from her solitude in search of choring carolers and chiming bells, glittering tinsel and gleaming trees. As she drew closer to the festivities in town she barely noticed a makeshift shed to her left, until it seemed to exert a force over her.

Estella looked at the shed, which appeared lifeless and uninhabited. She shrugged and began to walk away, but something drew her back. An unheard, unseen sensation was beckoning to her.

She knocked at the door and received no answer, only the pulling sensation. Scarcely remembering she possessed them and sorely out of practice, Estella invoked her telepathic powers. Closing her eyes, she gave her utmost concentration. She intoned the proper chants, all but forgotten, and entered a deeper realm of consciousness.

A picture came into focus, an image of a dying elf. Beside his bed were jack-o'-lanterns ...

Estella snapped out of her trance. "Jack-o'-lanterns!" She cried in exasperation. "I certainly am out of practice!"

She chanted and concentrated over and over, always with the same result. Tolefson, sensing her presence at last, mustered just enough strength to open the door and, doing so, collapsed at Estella's feet.

Estella hunted in the woods for elements of healing, and she administered a special mixture drop by painstaking drop. For several days, she listened to Tolefson's shallow breaths and checked intermittently for a heartbeat.

On Christmas morning, as voices everywhere echoed messages of joy and good will, Tolefson opened his eyes and smiled faintly. Estella's faith in yuletide magic was reaffirmed.

In the weeks that followed, Tolefson and Estella drew life from one another. As their companionship flourished, their bitterness diminished. Their lives entwined enchantingly, and the joy of rejuvenation was reflected in their faces.

Tolefson's attachment to Halloween increased beyond his wildest expectations. Estella imparted many fascinating facts and fables, and his newfound knowledge overflowed into his attitude. In no time at all, he was his quick, pert, energetic self again.

Estella learned more about Christmas than she had ever dreamed possible, for Tolefson was indefatigable in his storytelling.

With the passing of years, an undercurrent rippled through the townspeople's minds. An old-timer had planted the seed by observing, "If the Christmas Witch and the Halloween Elf can accept each other, maybe we ought to try and accept them, too." Labels faded and superstitions melted away as people began seeing the couple through newly focused eyes.

The more adventuresome among them gathered valuable folklore firsthand from Tolefson and Estella.

Several families welcomed them warmly, and they happily began making friends.

There are still those who, for one reason or another, view them at a distance as a curiosity. Whatever is said about them, however, their admirability is rarely disputed.

Most people look at them with longing, for together Tolefson and Estella exude an aura that sparkles with hope and glistens with understanding. The Christmas Witch and the Halloween Elf have bewitched everyone with a quality of love that is desirable in any season.

The China Doll and The Meadowlark by Michael Kocik

Ah! There she was -- a pretty china doll, covered with yellow paper lace and a solemn blue bonnet, nestled among the sparkle of red and green packages near the fire. Oh! And the tin soldier, and the drum with bits of yellow plaster strung along the top, kept careful watch in case the fire went out, or the holly fell, or the cinnamon sprigs attempted an amorous dance with the old Dutch clock above the mantelpiece -- not that they could prevent any of this, but they kept watch all the same.

It was Christmas night. The waning embers from the hearth cast webs of light everywhere about the room: into the corners, where the brass pots and bronze kettles clung fiercely to the walls; under the tables, with their chipped legs resembling Alpine walking sticks; and around the calico drapes, hanging from the windows like multicolored whiskers -- everywhere, in short, but on the place the tin soldier wanted most, which was where the china doll lay at rest. Moving his head as much as he could (which wasn't very far), all the tin soldier could see was some yellow lace, a bit of blue bonnet, and a pink left cheek.

The tin soldier stood steadfastly at attention, but, try as he might, he couldn't keep his mind off the china doll and her pink left cheek.

"Smooth as ice crystals dangling from a Cossack's moustache," the tin soldier thought, remembering the bitter nights by the chink in the wall, where he and his regiment had re-enacted the French retreat from Moscow. "Bright as a bayonet gleaming in the Egyptian sun, too," he reflected, as his eyes wandered back to the spot where she lay.

"Eyes forward!" the drum tap-tap-tapped, as the tin soldier snapped back into attention, a trace of red appearing around his jaw. You see, being a veteran of a score of imaginary campaigns, and having traveled hundreds of inches over the bulrush mats, the garden chickweed, and back and forth again across the Great Pond, he did not like to be

reminded of his duty any more often than necessary. To be caught shirking his duty meant a night in the pine chest; and, if he were going to disgrace himself, he would rather that it wasn't on Christmas night, and in the presence of the pretty china doll.

So, standing as rigidly as possible, the tin soldier and his drum spent the night in a steady vigil over the entire room. In the morning he was carried away to lay siege to Cairo, but not before he caught a glimpse of the china doll where she lay fast asleep.

"She is more beautiful than I imagined last night," he thought approvingly. "She would make a perfect wife, if only --"

But, before he could complete his thought, he was whisked off into an old jewelry box filled with sand.

While he was away, the china doll spent the day in glancing out the window nearest the fire, and wondering what the rest of the world looked like. As she watched, as steadfast in her own way as the tin soldier had been in his, it began to snow, and each separate bit of rime imparted strange visions of foreign lands: of silks and satins from the Far East; of tiny vials of French perfume, that seemed to tinkle as they popped against the windowpane; of velvet cushions laden with Arabian coins, that turned into Norwegian sleighs whenever the wind twisted them about in the crisp air.

Day after day passed like this, with the winter storms parading before her window like marionettes in a dusty theater -- tossing up images in uneven motions, and just as quickly brushing them away. At times it was all she could do to keep from crying; but, being made of porcelain, the best she could manage was a wistful sigh.

"Why do you sigh so, daughter?" the fire asked as her cinders floated like swans across the chimney.

Now, this fire always called the china doll her daughter, inasmuch as she having assisted in the fashioning of many porcelain

objects in her time, and no one else having laid claim to her, she felt she had as much right to be the china doll's mother as any other. In truth, this fire was really quite vain, and delighted in appearing more wise than she actually was, but as she possessed a kind heart and meant well no one troubled to correct her -- least of all the china doll. So, when the fire made her gentle query into the cause of such unhappiness, the china doll sighed again (for good measure) and confided in her as readily as if she were her real mother:

"There's a wonderful wide world out there, Fyrtha, and I shall never see any of it from this room."

The fire glowed as yellow as lemon rinds (which indicated that she was engaged in deep thought), and then answered:

"Pooh! The world doesn't start at the window, nor end at the door. The smoke I send up this chimney travels all over the world, and is no better for it than I, who must sit here week after week, and month after month, without the least prospect of seeing it. Daughter, if you want my advice," -- and here the fire crackled noisily, for the effect it would have on the china doll -- "open your eyes to the wonder around you. The smallest things which escape the eye are no less beautiful to a kind heart, for being small, than they would be if a hundred times larger. Follow the example of the tin soldier, who never complains, though he must stand at attention for hours on end without twitching the smallest muscle. He is steadfast and brave, and would be the perfect match for you!"

Here the fire broke off in an enormous crackle, and left the china doll to her own thoughts -- which was just as well she did so, for the china doll did not at all like what she had heard, much less the last bit of flattery about the tin soldier. For the china doll, though made of porcelain, was capable of as much feeling as those with less crystalline hearts; and, indeed, it was possible that if the fire had not been so bold as to suggest an affection between the two, the china doll might have followed the inclinations of her own heart, and done all along what she really could not resist.

Night after night, when the snow had ceased to form restless fancies in the china doll's eyes, and the fire had settled into a self-conscious bristling in the hearth, the tin soldier would return from his wanderings and stand watch over the tiny room until dawn. At first the china doll had paid no attention to the tin soldier, whose sense of dignity would not allow him to express his feelings in any way other than in the vigilant manner in which he stood guard. But, due to the closeness of the room, and the small distance between them each night, she could not help but become aware that the way he stood watch was protective to an unusual degree.

"How very handsome he looks, with the shadows falling on his green uniform!" the china doll thought to herself, the morning after she had first noticed his special

attentions. "If only his brass buttons were of polished silver, or his drum a Persian steed, or his tattered knapsack a merchant's --"

Idle musings, such as these, filled her thoughts during those first few days, and fairly tumbled over themselves in trying to imagine the tin soldier as something greater than he actually was, until she had almost convinced herself that his buttons were of polished silver; that his drum was really a Persian steed, under enchantment; and that his knapsack was none other than a merchant's -- : or, at the very least, something like it, because she never could quite decide what his satchel most resembled.

Though being naturally of a very passionate and impetuous disposition, in spite of a porcelain exterior, the china doll did all she could to conceal it by pretending to be aloof and disinterested whenever the tin soldier was around. In this way she followed the advice of the fire, who innocently pointed out that the best way to ignite a cinder was by attempting to smolder it first.

To what extent this piece of trickery worked to arouse the tin soldier's emotions is not certain; however, being very shy and uncertain of his feelings, he was unable to reveal them except by intensifying what he did best -- and that was through the discipline of a soldier. So, while the china doll tried to show her love by hiding her feelings, the tin soldier's affections developed irrespective of how she conducted herself in front of him, and expressed itself in the carefulness with which he watched over her at night. By how different means is the same end worked at!

No doubt the better feelings of the china doll would have gradually been touched by the attentions of the tin soldier, if left to themselves. Given time, and the right set of circumstances, a sense of tenderness might have grown between them, and displaced the wariness with which lovers so often regard each other. In time, then, the tin soldier might have learned to abandon his awkwardness, in the sympathy of a smile; and the china doll, in turn, to forego her haughtiness, in the confidence of a warm embrace. All this might have come to pass, if the fire had not made the mistake of praising the tin soldier in front of her.

In a moment, the fondest illusions of the china doll were shattered. Though willing, by herself, to imagine the tin soldier as possessing some mystery that would make him worthy of her, the idea of someone else recognizing that worth, while denying the mystery, was too much for her to bear. Was it true that her beloved was really nothing but a common soldier, instead of a Danish prince? As she accepted this, her visions of merchants dissolved into tattered knapsacks; his Persian steed dwindled into a yellow drum; and the polished silver again became dull brass buttons.

"How very dreary his uniform looks in the firelight," the china doll thought to herself, as she observed him standing guard that evening. "If only he wouldn't watch me with those pale blue eyes; I do believe

Teerytotham, the clock, blushes when he sees us so. Oh, how I wish I was far away from here, and out in the wide world!"

Though the tin soldier's affection for the china doll had developed before she had first noticed him, and continued unchanged no matter how indifferent she acted towards him, he could not help but be hurt by the contempt with which she now treated him.

"Am I really so very hateful to her?" he wondered to himself, late one night, as he gazed upon her pink left cheek while she lay fast asleep.

However, not knowing any other way to respond, he merely stood guard more carefully than he had done before. If anything, this silence seemed to infuriate the china doll even more, until one day she simply refused to return his glances -- and this though they were no more than two feet apart, all the while!

Soon, the winter passed; and with it went the hoar frost that clung like whiskers to the cold earth, and kept the flowers from peeping out during the day. But with it did not pass the china doll's restlessness, which found in the chirping of the crickets, and the violin-like sounds of leaves rushing across willow branches, the same unhappiness which the snow had brought.

One fine day, when the berries had reached their deepest redness, a meadowlark perched itself on the window ledge, and called out to her:

"Come, pretty china doll, and show me the garden -- come, see the garden with me!"

The china doll, however, was too proud to answer, so the meadowlark laughed and flew away.

The next day, at about the same time of the morning, the meadowlark again perched

itself on the window ledge, and called out to her in a voice even more enticing than before:

"Come, pretty china doll, and show me the garden pond -- come, see the pond with me!"

At this, the china doll tried to move her lips; but, saying nothing, the meadowlark again laughed and flew away.

On the third morning, when the tin soldier was off on another campaign, and the fire was slowly simmering in the hearth, the meadowlark again returned, and addressed her:

"Come, pretty china doll, and show me the garden hedge -- come, see the hedge with me!"

Hearing this proved almost too much for the china doll, who was already longing to see the world, so, nodding her head, she climbed up a ladder made of willow strands, which the meadowlark had provided, and onto his back.

As soon as the china doll had fastened a red ribbon around her wrist, and tied it to his neck, the meadowlark flew off into the air until it alighted on one of the lower branches of the tallest tree in the garden.

"Now you are out in the wide world," the meadowlark laughed, plucking a leaf from one of the twigs so the china doll could fan herself.

"I never imagined the world would be so big," she replied, feeling somewhat giddy after the flight.

"No, no, no," laughed the meadowlark, who was very fond of thinking he knew all about the world because he was always flying above it; "this is only a common garden. The world itself doesn't really begin for another hundred yards: it runs on for a mile, over the northern fjords; skips around the blue

GREAT MOMENTS

in the history of Fantasy Literature

1947: Stephen R. Donaldson's mother is
frightened by a **THESAURUS**



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valleys, where the Sishoj elves live; and ends at the foot of the eastern mountains. I have seen most of it in my wanderings, and I must admit it is a big world."

"Oh! what is that pretty object that shines like a silver saucer, and looks like it could hold a barrel of black tea?" the china doll asked, pointing to the pond below.

"That is an ocean," the meadowlark sniffed, "though it is rather cramped and untidy. Most oceans are twice the size, at the least, so you can imagine there is nothing so very wonderful about that one. A bobolink once told me that the Emperor of China crossed one like that a century ago, though why he would be so cross with it, I don't know."

"If it is no trouble, I should like a bit of the ocean to take back with me, to show I have been somewhere," the china doll said.

As it wasn't so very much to ask, the meadowlark borrowed the gold thimble attached to her lace dress, and flew down to the pond to fill it. However, as he was very careless, he managed to spill out all the water on his way back, so that by the time the china doll received it, the thimble was empty. But, as she didn't know the difference, she thanked him anyway.

After the meadowlark had finished telling how how the hedge was really an ugly old troll, under a witch's spell; and how the trees were all cobbles, making fruit out of shoes; and how the grass only sprouted in the spring, because of a pact the ground had made with the sun, the china doll again fastened the ribbon around his neck, and held on tight as he carried her up into the sky.

Down below her, as they flew, she could see tall cliffs decorated with snow-white mists; dark mounds covered with gray rocks and riverweed; and thatch huts, no bigger than her bonnet, resting comfortably in fields of grain that swayed back and forth like a Japanese fan -- and the meadowlark told her a story for each. As they soared over the giant steeple in Copenhagen, the meadowlark told her that it was really a darning needle, used by the moon to sew a dark blanket over the earth each night. And when they had passed over a bonfire, cloaked in an eerie sort of afternoon mist, he told her that it was only the earth winking at the sun, to let it know that everything was alright.

The china doll looked at the world with one eye closed, and one eye open (because she was almost as afraid of missing something, as she was of falling), and decided it was too big for her to bear.

"Oh, please take me back," she begged the meadowlark. "The world is too wide to look at, all at once."

So, the meadowlark laughed once more, and told her he would only take her back if she promised to go with him that night, and become his wife. The meadowlark, you see -- for all his feelings of superiority -- really loved the china doll, and could not bear to be without her. As the china doll still hated the tin soldier, and as she secretly wanted to see more of the world, she agreed.



"But what about the tin soldier?" she asked, as the meadowlark set her on the window ledge. "He stands guard every night, with the drum, and is sure to sound an alarm."

The meadowlark thought hard for a moment, and then handed her a scarf of silver gauze.

"Wear this around your neck, tonight. The reflection of the moonlight will help put the tin soldier to sleep." After saying this, he set the china doll down, near the fire, and flew away with a promise to return that evening.

"Where have you been, daughter?" the fire asked after the meadowlark had departed.

"Off to see the wide world, with the meadowlark," the china doll replied, as her lower lip began to tremble.

"Oh, daughter," the fire said, in a sad and low voice, "I only hope what you saw was worth breaking the tin soldier's heart." And, with this, the fire burned low in the hearth, and said not another word.

That night the tin soldier returned from his campaigns, and began to stand watch over the room, as usual. As night fell, and the smell of hyacinths floated through the window, the china doll slipped on the scarf of silver gauze, and waited for the meadowlark. From the light of the moon, the gauze emitted a twinkling pattern of colors that made the tin soldier drowsy each time he gazed on it. The longer he looked, the sleepier he felt -- for, in truth, it had been enchanted by a witch three centuries before.

Gradually, and without being aware of it, the tin soldier drifted off into a sleep where he dreamed of wars, and battles, and

bright gold medals. Just at that moment, the meadowlark flew in the window and allowed the china doll to climb up the ladder of willow strands, but, before they could escape, the soldier's drum started tap-tap-tapping out an alert.

In a moment, the tin soldier awoke from his sleep. Looking up to see the meadowlark with the china doll upon its back, he came to the conclusion that she was being kidnapped. Seizing his rifle, the tin soldier charged towards the meadowlark and pierced its leg with his bayonet.

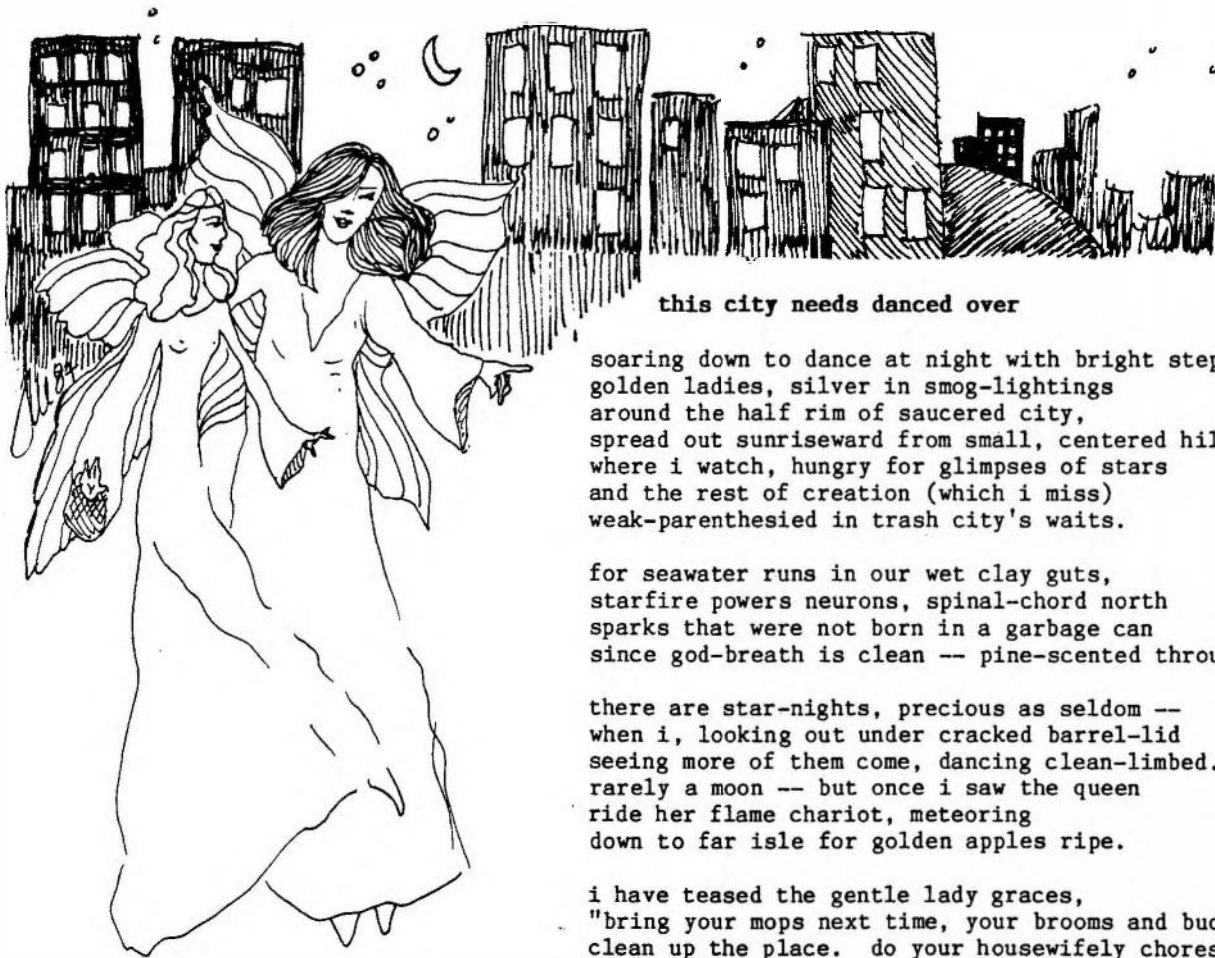
Screaming in pain, the meadowlark hastily set the china doll upon the window ledge, and flew back to attack the tin soldier. As the drum tapped out its support, the tin soldier valiantly struggled to defend himself, but the match proved too much for him. After a few brief minutes, the meadowlark seized the tin soldier in its claws, and tossed him into the fire.

Standing bolt upright in the hearth, his form illuminated by the rising flames, the china doll watched in silence as first the blue in his pants, and then the green in his

uniform began to fade -- all without his uttering a single word of complaint. At the sight of someone she had once loved, suffering a slow death, all the feeling she had fought to hide swelled within her, and released itself in a cry of anguish. Forgetting where she was, she started to rush forward to save him -- and tumbled off the ledge, onto the floor, where she broke into a dozen pieces.

The tin soldier knew he was melting; but the sight of the china doll, lying there broken on the floor, consumed him even more than the fire. She looked at him from where she lay, and he looked at her; and for one brief instant, before the soldier disappeared, they were united as one.

It was all over very soon. In the morning, all that was left in the fire was a lump of tin, and a bit of porcelain shaped like a heart. No one knew how it got there, but the two had melted together, overnight, and formed a little lump of black coal that was buried in the garden the following day -- near the pond shaped like a silver saucer.



this city needs danced over

soaring down to dance at night with bright steps --
golden ladies, silver in smog-lightings
around the half rim of saucered city,
spread out sunriseward from small, centered hill
where i watch, hungry for glimpses of stars
and the rest of creation (which i miss)
weak-parenthesied in trash city's waits.

for seawater runs in our wet clay guts,
starfire powers neurons, spinal-chord north
sparks that were not born in a garbage can
since god-breath is clean -- pine-scented through roses.

there are star-nights, precious as seldom --
when i, looking out under cracked barrel-lid
seeing more of them come, dancing clean-limbed.
rarely a moon -- but once i saw the queen
ride her flame chariot, meteorizing
down to far isle for golden apples ripe.

i have teased the gentle lady graces,
"bring your mops next time, your brooms and buckets,
clean up the place. do your housewifely chores."
their laughs are never tinged with bitterness:
"we wait the time to come much closer, dear --
so barefoot we can dance and feel no pain,
quick hand in yours, up every brightened path."

-- Charles Ramp

HILD

by Tim Callahan

Clothed in ragged flesh,
Half rotted rise the avengers.
Pale as bone against a bloody sky,
The lifeless rise in the dying sun.

For Hild has passed,
Grimly grieving,
Lifespells weaving,
Winning wan warriors
Away from death.

Harsh cried of exultation
Rabble throats dry as dust.
Rib-snared swords are wrenched and retrieved,
Rusted swords and riven shields,
Spears brandished in oft slain hands
...Alive again!

For Hild has passed,
Grimly grieving,
Lifespells weaving,
Winning wan warriors
Away from death.

And each to his camp stalks a rutted road.
Father and Lover,
Each to the ends of the hazeled field
Gathers anew his ancient army.
Father and Lover! Father and Lover!
Each plots again the death for the other!

For Hild has passed,
Grimly grieving,
Lifespells weaving,
Winning wan warriors
Away from death.

Centuries ago it began.
Centuries ago it was.
Centuries ago...

Hild that night with her lover lay.
The waves that tossed the sailing-serpent
Tossed the bold pair in blissful torment,
Eased and aided the lovers' play.

The magic preincess to the hero bold
Had flown from love of parents dear,
To serpent ship from sea girt hold,
Fulfilling her father's darkest fear.

But they were spied ere the wave-skimmer sped
Through screaming gulls, past skarps and skerries
To loving thrusts and passionate parries
On open ocean and bridal bed.

They heard not the horn's harsh blast,
Summoning kinsmen from hound and hawk.
And they saw not the war arrow passed,
Nor host assemble at the Lawgiver's Rock.

Ten keels scraped by the slushy sand
Pushed proud prow into surging sea
Hogni, the kind, dark with wrath swore he.
Vowed death to Hedin by the sword in his hand.

Far faring dragons' flawshing oars lashed
Aeger's ale to churning foam.
Ten grim serpents in a crescent flashed.
Curved round the lovers' wind-tossed home.

But Hedin slipped from Hogni's hard grip.
By Hild's high magic a wind arose
And sped them through ere the jaws could close
To rock girt isle fled the lovers' lone ship.

Nine serpents circled and isle grim and bleak.
Nine long dragons blocked the lovers' escape.
Hogni sailed shoreward his vengeance to wreak.
Shield-wall faced shield-wall, love's battle to shape.

Nine serpents circled, but dared not land:
Once Hogni's host faced Hedin's spears
Hild's stark sorcery raised sailors' dark fears.
Mists sealed the isle at the wave of Hild's hand!

High minded Hild then the battle dared breach.
Between bristling walls bore the gift of peace.
Against blood vengeance love's light to teach,
Bade bold warriors their battle to cease.

She bore forth from Hedin to Hogni a gift,
A ring well wrought and richly in gold,
Bearing the image of a boar fierce and bold,
A sign of respect to help heal the rift.

Highly then Hogni praised Hedin's ring.
"Tusk is bared boldly by boar of gold.
Thus Hedin thinks of me!" quoth the king.
Hogni's heart warmed toward Hedin the bold.

But evil Illugi, a wretch Hild had spurned,
Seared Hogni's heart with venomous speech.
Serpent tongued wolf-heart with soul of a leech!
Hogni's vain pride to a mean path he turned.

"A sow the ring-hole rides round, I see."
-So spake Illugi to Hogni the king-
"A well ridden sow Hedin hopes you will be!
Bending you over he'd pierce your ring!"

Hogni hurled ring and reason away.
Bade Hedin's host to the hazeled field.
Illugi's word-wound would never be healed.
Ravens feasted that unhappy day.

Flashing sword-storm made shield bosses ring
Spear drank blood. Ax bit bone.
To the whine of arrows did Valkyries sing.
Gondul's song was the dying man's groan.

Men hacked and hewed as beasts that rend.
Father and Lover brought death to each other,
As at World's Doom brother slays brother.
All lay silent at the day's end.

Grieving Hild life-spells wove,
Hedin and Hogni raised from the dead.
Against their hate her anguish strove,
But vengeance stood in reason's stead.

At dawn, again the sword did rend.
Ax bit bone. Spear drank blood.
Hedin and Hogni fell in spear-storm flood.
...Hild raised corpses at the day's end

Centuries ago it was.
Centuries ago it began.
Centuries ago...

And still they kill on the shrouded isle.
Father and Lover! Father and Lover!
Each still seeks death for the other!

For Hild has passed,
Grimly grieving,
Lifespells weaving,
Winning wan warriors
Away from death.

And it will go on 'til the ravening hounds
Swallow sun and Moon.
And, writhing, Earth
To chaos returns.

For Hild has passed,
Grimly grieving,
Lifespells weaving,
Winning wan warriors
Away...
From peace!

Esmarella The Witchkin by Lee Beasley

Once, there was a witchkin named Esmarella who always rushed through her witchery. Because she did not practice, at times her broom would slip when she rode it and lop off several treetops. When she called a weather chant, more often than not, snow showered down instead of the rain she had asked for.

But this day, Essie finished boiling the hoggett powder for their sheep without a single mistake. With a sigh of relief, she divided the mixture in six smaller pots and added a flavored dye to each -- cherry red, butter yellow, blueberry blue, mint green, grape violet, and orange orange. She loved the colors the wool turned after the sheep ate the grain mixed with the hoggett powder. After she stored the pots, she turned and stroked the long white fur of her cat, Drammie, as it lay on the sunny window ledge.

"Hmm-m-m-m. What if I had a blue cat, or a green one, or maybe a violet one?" She giggled at the thought. "Well," she told Drammie, "let's see how you look after you eat this." She mixed a bit of the blue powder in the cat's food, and set the dish on the floor. She forgot the warning that her mother, Belda, had given her -- that magic had its dangers and its price.

At that moment, Belda called from outside, "Esmarella, I need some more water, please."

"Oh, bats, not now. Just when I want to see what happens!" Essie said to herself. Maybe, she thought, I can get back before Drammie finished her food. So she jumped up and called, "Coming, Beldamom," and grabbed the bucket. She ran down to the creek, filled it, and rushed back, spilling a little on the way.

"Thank you, you were quick." Her mother turned to smile at the girl but saw Essie already disappearing into the hut.

Inside, Essie paused to catch her

breath as she looked at the bowl, now empty. Drammie was nowhere to be seen.

"Now that's odd," Essie said to herself. "No Drammie sunning herself, or sleeping by the fire, or chasing butterflies."

She looked around but saw only a small blue treefrog. Something about it looked familiar. It batted one of its front legs at a butterfly just like Drammie always did.

"Drammie? Oh, my poor Drammie. The powder didn't work right on you. What can I do?" Slowly she bent over and offered her hand. The little treefrog promptly hopped onto it, purring. Yes, it was Drammie.

Suddenly, she thought, I can't let Beldamom see what I did. She says I do things too fast. Essie peeked through the open door and saw that Beldamom was still busy.

"What am I going to do?" The little treefrog, now on the table, stared at her and licked its foot. Essie sat down and propped her head in her hands.

After a moment, she spoke to the cat-frog, "With magic, what can be done, can also be undone. That's what Beldamom always says. Now, how to turn you back into a cat." She looked about and noticed an old book on the shelf.

Her eyes widened. "Drammie, look. Beldamom's book of magic." Essie grinned. "Soon you'll be a cat again."

She took the book down and blew the dust off its cover. She turned several of its worn and tattered pages before she stopped. This one she read then sighed. "It would take hours before it could work, Drammie." The frog mewed and hopped around.

Essie turned to the section on spells. "Now, here are the color spells."

The first about how to change the sky to yellow, she knew, would not do. The second one was too faded to read. She flipped through the others and picked one.

Essie glanced out the door and saw her mother still working. Now, staring at Drammie, she clasped her hands and rushed through the chant, stumbling over the long words.

"Ahde kirinini, ahde lumbasine,
Over skin, over size, over green
Creep and crawl and do it all."

The little frog's blue skin darkened to dark green and her body grew to half her cat size. Drammie stared at Essie with gold-flecked eyes. She gently held the frog's large front legs with both hands.

"Oh, Drammie, what have I done? It should have worked! Now you're green! Oh, I didn't pay attention." Essie's voice trembled and tears came. She wiped them away fiercely.

The next one she tried was a white spell although its directions were faded in spots. "Oh, this is it. I'll just skip over the faded spots," she told the frog. Quickly she stepped around the table. She chanted, garbling the unfamiliar words.

"Pallatur monome omagus,
Step right, step left, step up, step
down,
Go in a circle round a light,
Once that is done, all will be white."

She watched Drammie grow to cat size, a white, longhaired frog with a fluffy cat's tail! Drammie crouched and mewed softly.

Essie bit her lips and squeezed her eyes tight for a long minute. Then, she reached for the book again. "Maybe the next spell, Drammie." She patted the white frog head.

On the next one she concentrated hard. She practiced the odd words first. Then she followed each step as best she could. Slowly she chanted:

"Drambad, endad, iloac,
Hop nine times up and nine times
back.
With your blood and bones, your skin
and eyes,
Show your true color and your true
size."

With a loud clap and a puff of silver smoke, the big white frog blurred into a big white -- Drammie! Essie hugged her as Beldamom came running in.



"Esmarella! What is going on? What have you been doing?" She saw the book open on the table. "My old magic book! Did you use one of the spells in it? I've told you not to touch it."

"Essie nodded. "I know, but I had to, and I did it, Beldamom." She snuggled the cat in her arms while she told her mother what happened. "And I was so scared," she rattled on. "I'm going to be extra careful after this. I don't want anything to happen to my Drammie ever again."

Beldamom drew a deep breath. "I'm glad Drammie is all right, and that you are, too. But, Esmarella, magic becomes dangerous when it isn't used right. Do you want a storm or fire to destroy our place and maybe all of us? Do you want

our sheep scattered or our crops ruined?"

Essie's eyes widened and she shook her head. Then she stroked Drammie's fur with her cheek as her mother continued, "Magic works best when it is needed. Even then, you must follow each step carefully just as you did with the hoggett powder. You must learn your witchery thoroughly. Only then can you take your place at my side."

"Now, I'm proud you could work a spell from my old book. Some are so faded that I'm never sure about them. You can help me work on them."

Abruptly, Drammie leaped out of Essie's arms and hopped across the floor. She croaked, "Ribbit, ribbit, ribbit."



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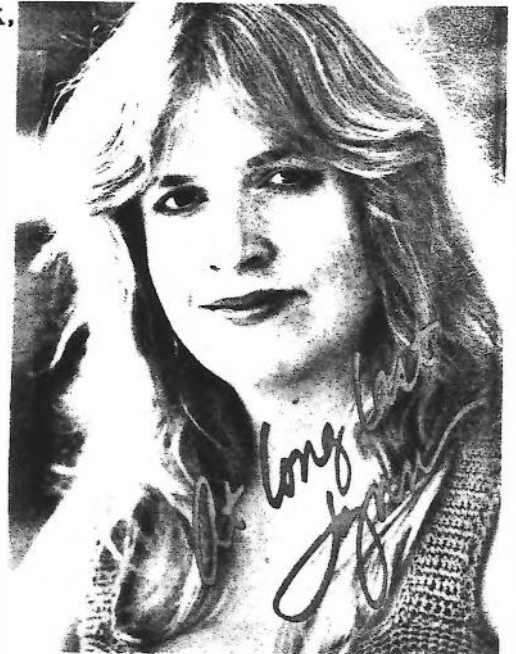
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LYNN MAUDLIN



The Fountain and the Black Fish

by Gwenyth E. Hood

I.

It was late afternoon when Oscar Verplank and his mother arrived at his Aunt Penny's apartment. The boards of the porch creaked as they crossed to the heavy oak door. "The house is more than a hundred years old," murmured his mother as she rang the bell. A buzz sounded and Oscar quickly opened the door. "They had to update the place to make it livable, Mother," he noted. As they climbed the creaky stairs, the door to the upstairs apartment was thrown open.

"Louise! It's been too long!" cried the woman who rushed out. As the sisters embraced each other, Oscar surveyed them. They looked alike in many ways. His mother was in her early forties, and Aunt Penny only three years younger. Both had brown hair, and blue eyes, and ample figures. Louise's dark-tinted hair, like her dreams, was cut short at her earlobes, while Penny's hair, frosted on the surface by natural grey, fell in bountiful curls upon her shoulders. Both had heart-shaped faces expressing a somewhat childlike sweetness. But Louise's was the tempered sweetness of a woman who had learned patience by taking back her dreams for alterations too many times; Penny had an ominously untamed vivacity about her.

Oscar was a well-built thirteen year old with horn-rimmed glasses and a turtleneck. He winced fashionably as his Aunt swept him into her arms and kissed him; then, glad that this awkward ceremony was over, he followed the women into the living room.

"Would you like to see the place first before we go over to the hotel? My bag's all packed, and I only need to throw it into your car—or my car if you prefer. It's only a mile or so down the road, walking distance, really."

"Hotel? I thought we were staying with you," said Louise.

"You are. I'm staying there too. I've made reservations for the week, and I've already paid, so don't give me an argument." She smiled teasingly. "It has a swimming pool. I don't."

Louise had opened her mouth to protest, but paused suddenly and finally spoke in some uncertainty. "Well, Penny, you know I hate to see money wasted. But with you, there's bound to be some hidden meaning in this, isn't there?"

"Louise—" coaxed Penny, her eyes

dancing.

Her sister let out a short laugh which was both accusing and conspiratorial. "With you, I never can trust the obvious!" Penny hugged her, and Louise surrendered. "Maybe I'll play it safe and do it your way this time!"

Oscar, meanwhile, was circling the room. "How many animals have you got here, Aunt Penny?" Two cats, one with a fluffy bluish coat, and another with short black fur, were rubbing his ankles. A third, a Siamese with cream colored body and black mask, was surveying him more warily from the top of a bookshelf level with his head. A canary was chirping merrily from a cage on the south side of the room. Against the opposite wall was a fifty-gallon fish tank where black striped angelfish drifted by the glass.

"I don't know how many, Oscar. I think of them species by species when I buy their food and one by one when I feed them. I've never thought to count them all up."

"You've never counted them?" Oscar echoed her, a little scornful.

"No, I haven't really. I have three cats and one canary, but I haven't counted the angelfish or the frogs recently."

"The frogs!" Oscar turned toward the wall facing the door and noticed a ten gallon tank there for the first time. Several small, dark shapes were floating near the surface, one of them half under and half above the water. "Are those the frogs?" he asked.

"Yes, there they are. African clawed frogs. They used to be sold in exotic pet stores, but since some of them escaped into the environment and started taking over, they're harder to get nowadays. But these won't get away from me."

Oscar stared around him in fascination. A feeling which he did not understand welled in him—was it anger or desire? Something was here, more than his Aunt had said, a darkness and depth, a sense of meanings and mysteries floating like fish just under the surface, just out of reach, waiting to be caught and pulled to light, to be counted, weighed and measured by Oscar. "This is really neat! I'd rather stay here than at the hotel," he said spontaneously. "What's wrong? Isn't there room?"

"Dear, if Aunt Penny decided—" began Louise.

"We can spend the evening here if you wish," conceded his Aunt, "and go to the hotel later. I had most of tomorrow's dinner ready for us anyway, so I can whip it up quickly."

The dinner pleased Oscar, especially the devil's food cake. In the after-dinner tour of the building, hoped to find more mysteries, and he did. In the room adjoining Penny's bedroom, which was itself large enough to be another bedroom, there was only one piece of furniture: a bare wooden chair set up near the southern wall, facing a single fish tank. The tank's aerator was bubbling constantly, and its floor was lined with tan colored gravel and small smooth rocks of brown and white. But there was only one fish in it, a fish some four inches long, solid black, with long fins and bulging eyes.

"A black goggle-eyed goldfish!" cried Louise. "I've seen them in stores and always wondered why anyone would buy one."

"They're Telescope Goldfish," Oscar informed her.

"They're specially bred to have that look, and they're much more expensive than the common goldfish."

An easel had been set up only a few feet in front of the tank, and in their eagerness to look at the fish, Oscar and Louise had passed in front of it. Now Louise turned to face it. "Is that your latest painting? Oh, Penny, it's beautiful!"

The picture was a swirl of silver, blue, green and delicate flesh-tones. It seemed to center on a splashing fountain, which was set in the midst of a grove before a stone building. Moonlight shone down on seven youths and maidens dancing there. Their flying hair melted into the moonlight and the white spray of the water, half concealing and half revealing their lithe bodies.

"I'm rather pleased with the way it's come out," admitted Penny. "It doesn't bring out the concept in my mind, but it's the best I've done yet."

The black fish suddenly rose to the surface of the tank and began to thrash around wildly. "What's the matter with him?" cried Oscar, turning.

"Oh, we've been blocking his view too long. Dr. Bache is used to having things his own way, Oscar," said Penny. Startled, the two stepped aside, staring at the fish. It returned to the bottom of its tank and stared back at them.

"Dr. Bache?" mused Louise. Then she grinned at her sister. "Penny, you're wicked! That was the English Professor back at Woodville, the one who gave you such a hard time! Wasn't it?" At Penny's nod, she suppressed a laugh. "But you know, you're right. He always did look something like a black, goggle-eyed goldfish."

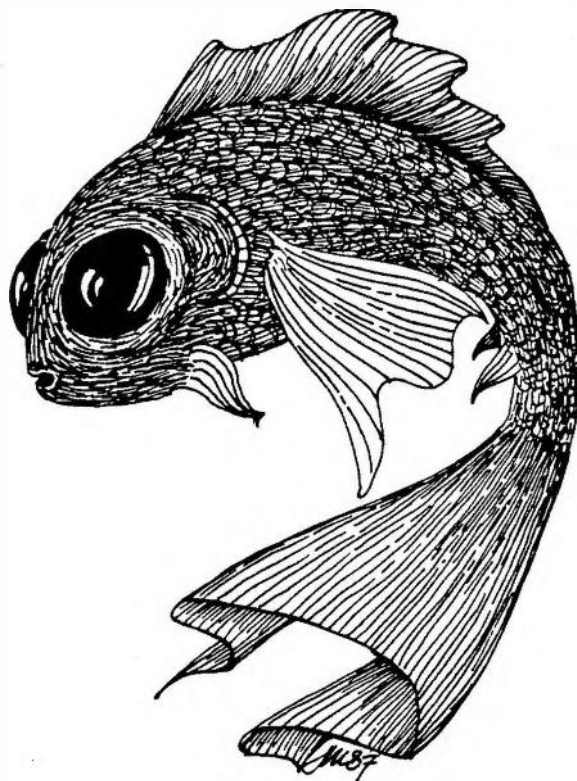
"A telescope goldfish, Mom," corrected Oscar.

"By the way, did they ever find out what happened to Dr. Bache?" continued Louise.

"No," said Penny with a strange smile. "He disappeared during examination period my senior year and was never heard from again."

Penny turned as if eager to leave the room, and Louise started after her.

"How come you have a stereo with earphones in this room?" inquired Oscar. "There's another in the living room, and that



must be more comfortable."

"Oh, for some blasted reason, Dr. Bache likes to listen to Igor Stravinsky's Rites of Spring," said Penny.

"With earphones?"

"I just attach them to the side of the tank. It seems to satisfy him."

As they left the room, the violent splashing began again. Penny turned. "What did I do wrong this time? Oh, yes, the marshmallows and graham crackers."

"Marshmallows and graham crackers?" cried Oscar. "Goldfish don't eat that!"

"Did I ever tell you he was a goldfish?" She winked at him. "You two wait out in the living room and I'll settle things here. It won't take long."

Oscar sat with his mother in the living room, but when Aunt Penny returned from the kitchen, he followed her silently into the tank-room and watched as she laid out two graham crackers on a table near the wall, and beside them four marshmallows enclosed in plastic. Next to these she also left a small jar of instant coffee and a hot pot with a plug. There were already two bowls set out there, filled with little packets of sugar and a non-dairy creamer. All this while the fish was watching intently from the corner of the tank nearest her. "There," Aunt Penny said, "it's all ready for you. If you want anything else, you'll have to go into the kitchen and get it from the refrigerator. Never mind the cats. A few cat hairs aren't going to kill you."

Then Penny turned around and saw Oscar. Her eyes widened for a moment and then returned to normal as quickly as if she had slipped on a poker-faced mask. "Oh, Oscar, am I taking too long?" she asked sweetly.

"You talk to a fish?"

"If you live long, you'll see stranger things than that, Oscar. Shall we get back to your mother?"

"How do you think he's going to get to the graham crackers over there?"

"He's done it before."

"That's crazy," said Oscar.

"So it is. Come on."

"It can't be true and crazy," said Oscar. "There has to be a logical explanation."

"I have great respect for logic, Oscar, but logic alone will not solve the mystery of the universe."

By this time Louise had come in. She had heard the last part of the conversation. For a moment she about to rebuke her son, but at last she turned to Penny instead. "Dr. Bache used to like graham crackers and marshmallows too. It was the only thing that kept me from hating him, when he made me come to his office for a chewing out. Whenever my stomach was getting all tied up in knots, I would focus on that bag of marshmallows, and then I would feel like laughing instead."

Penny nodded.

"Where did you get this fish?"

"I took him away from the fountain behind the library at Woodville. On graduation day. There used to be goldfish there, remember?"

"But not black goggle-eyed goldfish!" cried Louise.

"No, not usually. They're not as hardy and aren't usually kept in outdoor pools. This one appeared about two weeks before I left."

"About the same time Dr. Bache disappeared! Fifteen years ago!"

Oscar broke in. "But he couldn't have lived fifteen years! Telescope goldfish don't live that long!"

Penny smiled at him. "But this one has, Oscar."

Louise stared into her sister's eyes. "There's more to this than you're telling us."

"There is indeed. Do you really want to hear it?"

Louise hesitated, but Oscar cried, "Yes, I do!"

"Well, then, it's a long story," said Aunt Penny. She brought them to the living room and motioned them to sit down.

II

"Nineteen years ago," Penny began, "I started my undergraduate years at Woodville College. Your mother," she said to Oscar, "was already there, but she graduated at the end of the year. Then I was all alone, and I had to decide what to do with myself. I wanted to be a veterinarian, a lawyer and an artist with about equal energy. So what was I to do? I took a little bit of everything at first: biology and political science and art history and English. After a year or two of this, my desires were more focused, and they did not follow any of these routes exactly. In the life around me, in the records of history, and in the dreams and fantasies of

people long ago and people today, I began to see what seemed to be Hints or Keys to an overall Pattern or Shape. I wanted to trace those clues and find the Pattern. The more Footprints of this Mystery I found, the more ardent I was to track them to their source."

"I want to find it too!" cried Oscar, excitedly.

"Yes, it was only natural. But this is where Dr. Bache came in. Though my interest in all areas continued, I began to focus more and more on stories and literature, because that is where the human imagination takes its knowledge from every source and tries to fit it all together. During my senior year my eager search had let me to Medieval and Romantic literature, the subjects Dr. Bache taught. In fact since Woodville was a small school, he was the only one who taught them regularly. But his view of these dreams of our civilization was quite different from mine! He did not see them as a Key to a Great Reality. He did not even see them as the synthesis the human imagination makes of all its experience."

"He belonged to the school of literary theory known as Semiotics, the study of signs. To him, stories were not stories, but only texts, and the words within them were only signs. Signs did not refer to realities but to other signs. Signs referred to signs referring to other signs which referred to still more signs, and so on, endlessly. For Dr. Bache, proper interpretation in literature was not to search for a meaning behind the signs, but to trace the tortuous trails of signs leading to other signs, which led to other signs which meant the opposite halfway around the world until they all neutralized one another in elaborately unraveling patterns of delicately self-parodying irony."

Oscar gasped. "Um, what does that mean?"

"My own question, precisely. I tried hard to figure it out. I read Dr. Bache's books on Semiotics, but the more I read, the more convinced I became that it was an elaborate way of talking nonsense. But it was very elaborate nonsense and took time and great skill to do well. I was unwilling to spend that time because I feared that in pursuing his dead ends I would lose my own hot trail. So we were on a collision course. My papers came back from Dr. Bache all splashed with red ink. Conferences with him drove me to the verge of insanity. 'How can you write about what the text means?' he would ask sternly, and his horn-rimmed glasses made his eyes seem to glare even more. He always wore a black suit. 'What do you mean by meaning?' he would say, and my tongue would shrivel up."

"Dr. Bache," I croaked, "I mean what everyone means by meaning. Everyone knows what meaning means."

"Does everyone?" he would say. "What does everyone mean, then?" And my mind would go into spasm."

Louise yawned. "I had him for Lit. Intro. my sophomore year. That's why I switched my major to Geology."

"I thought of switching majors too, but

the scent of my trail would draw me back. 'Surely my great treasure is worth braving a little of this dragon's breath to find,' I would think. So I stayed with English and took classes from him when I couldn't get them with anyone else. But he and the danger he represented were always on my mind. Mentally I argued every text with him, and its treasures became more precious to me because of his scorn. When I sat alone by myself in the library, I would feel the gleam of his eyes through his horn-rimmed glasses beating on the back of my head, and it would spur me on to greater efforts. I think I had the same effect on him, because his tone would become especially scornful whenever he mentioned ideas we had once discussed, as if he were still fighting them out with me in his own mind. Also, though I usually sat at the back of his classes, his eyes rested on me when he made his more emphatic points."

"There really was a kind of magnetism between you, wasn't there?" observed Louise.

"Yes, I think there was a kind of love at the bottom of our hate. Eros, the desire of one soul to complete itself by union with another—Eros finds outlet in antagonism when the chance for union is blocked. But the more advanced I became, the angrier he became at my resistance to his theories. Then the harder he graded me; the more red he splashed on my paper, and the more often he would call me to his office and tell me I was naive and simplistic. 'But Dr. Bache,' I protested, sometimes tearfully, 'as far as I can see, if there is no solution, then there is nothing to puzzle about.' He shook his head in disgust.

"Somehow I managed to pass his courses, usually with B's or A minuses, but each course I took with him I feared that this time he would finally flunk me. In the Lake Poets' seminar my senior year, this came close to happening. He had given me a C on my first paper for putting too much stress on the importance of the French Revolution for Wordsworth's Prelude, and a C minus on the second one for finding a biographical allegory in Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. Now I had to write a ten page paper on "Kubla Khan," and unless I could make it abstruse, tedious and meaningless I might very well flunk the course. I pored and pored over the poem, searching for dust to throw across the page to please him, but I kept on finding pearls and rubies and diamonds instead, which shimmered and glimmered and kept me lingering over them in delight instead of doing my work.

"The night before the paper was due, I still had not written it. Dutifully I carried my notebook, notes and text to the library, hoping to leave at eleven with a good draft and spend the night typing it. But even then I kept finding diamonds and emeralds and did not collect enough dust. I left the library with no more than a few garbled paragraphs and an exhausted mind. Unless I could write a ten page paper by morning, not only would I flunk Bache's class, I would then not have enough English credits to complete my

major and so I could not graduate. So absorbed was I in these thoughts that I walked off in the wrong direction, to the dormitory where I had lived the year before instead of the one I belonged in that year.

"When I realized my mistake, I had to turn around and pass the library again. As I was walking in the quiet night across the nearly deserted campus, a calm descended on me with the sound of subtle music, and I realized that it did not actually matter whether I passed Bache's class or even whether I graduated. What mattered was whether the jewels I had found were genuine or false. What mattered was whether there truly was a reality behind that shimmering curtain of signs. I needed to know that, and that only.



"I walked on the footsteps of the wispy music which teased and wavered under the trees. It led me past the library and along the path to the fountain. There was a gibbous moon, just after full, shining in the sky, and its silvery rays flowed down into the water and seemed to become part of it. I stood still and breathed, and as I swallowed the moonlight, the music became clearer in my ears. The water shimmered, and as I drank in the sight, my vision became clearer too. Suddenly I saw figures dancing, dancing in the moonlight and the spray. There were seven or eight of them, springing with light feet and sure harmony, and in any instant I could not pick out a particular individual or tell whether they were naked or clothed in robes of starlight.

"But also as I stared I saw that they were not at the surface of the fountain. Somehow they were remote, deep within it, or within something else reflected in it. Yet the sight of them awakened such a tremendous longing that I thought I would go mad. Just as I was feeling that I would burst or faint if I stayed there any longer, their inviting voices sounded in my ears 'Come to us! Come to us, Penelope!' Without thinking, I leaped into the water.

"To my surprise, I did not land in the fountain but in the bed of a shallow river, in the midst of a strange wood. Clear water was rushing around my ankles in the starlight. I could not see the dancers now, but their voices still called, 'Come to us! Come to us, Penelope!' I walked on toward them and found myself climbing a smooth stone stream-bed upwards to a ledge from which there hung a shimmering curtain of water. Through it I could see the others dancing, still silver in the moonlight, and their voices were still singing, still calling.

"But I also saw then that the water was no ordinary water. It was mixed with fire, transforming fire which sparkled like diamonds, and as I stood there I knew that if I passed through it, I would never be the same again. Yet a man's voice, apart from the others and lower and gentler, called out to me, 'Come through to dance with us, Penelope. The fire will transform you to what you really are.' The sound swelled my longing so that I could endure it no more. Closing my eyes and clenching my fists, I plunged into the curtain. When the water touched my face it was cold as ice, but the next moment it became hot as fire. I cried out in terror, but my friend's voice called, 'Stretch out your hands, Penelope! Come to me! I am Pollux, I save the drowning!' I stretched out my hands and pushed on; for an instant I felt that every atom of my flesh had taken fire, and I nearly fainted then. Suddenly everything was ice again. Someone had seized my hands and pulled me forward and out.

Perfumed air fanned my face. I was in a fresh green meadow speckled with violets and daisies and wild roses. Holding my hands was a beautiful youth with silver hair and grey eyes like the starlight. I shrank away shyly,

but he called me by name, and I saw by the tender delight on his face that I also was beautiful in his eyes."

For a moment, Aunt Penny bowed her head and was silent, brushing away a tear. Oscar stared. After a moment, Louise said, "Do go on, Penny! Don't leave us hanging there!"

Penny looked up. "What more is there to say? We danced all night and in that dance I knew all there was to know that ever needed knowing, and all the history of human effort and failure unfolded before me like a vision and melted away in our joy at the dance. At dawn when it ended, I wandered to my dormitory, no more weary than if I had been sleeping peacefully, and my heart was still singing the wonders I had seen.

"I did not care that my dusty tedious paper was not written. I had seen the secret behind the curtain and that could never be taken away from me. None of the petty little troubles Mr. Bache could make for me mattered any more. I couldn't even get myself worried as, on my way to class, I rehearsed the tongue-lashing he was sure to give me.

It never occurred to me not to attend the class. I always attended classes except when sick, and with my mind absorbed in thoughts of Pollux, I was not ready to think out new patterns of behavior. Stumbling through established routines like a zombie was the best I could do. But my consciousness did have to resurface when I found Dr. Bache glaring at me. The four other students had handed in their papers and I, remaining seated, had become conspicuous. I met his gaze, and he said, perhaps repeated, 'Miss D'Angelis, do you have your paper done?'

"I tried to erase my smile and look apologetic, but despite my efforts I could feel joy radiating from every inch of my face. 'No, Dr. Bache,' I said.

"His frown deepened and he began to fidget. 'What do you mean, you don't have it done?' He shook his head impressively. 'You'd better have a very excellent and very plausible explanation!'

"I don't, Dr. Bache,' I said, trying to sound sad. 'I guess you'll have to flunk me.' My eyes were shining.

"He must have thought I was baiting him, saving a watertight excuse to embarrass him later. 'Miss D'Angelis, you will see me in my office right after class!' he snapped.

"Yes, sir,' I said.

"When I came, he was angrier than ever. 'What's the meaning of this, having no paper for me and no explanation?' he demanded.

"I have an explanation; it just isn't good or plausible,' I said.

"Well, let's hear it!' he cried.

"I can't write any more papers for you because I have seen the Reality behind the Curtain of Signs, everything has meaning for me now."

"He looked as though his eyes would burst through his horn-rimmed glasses. 'What?' he said.

"I told him about the fountain and the music. He looked frightened, but he spluttered, 'Miss D'Angelis! I don't know



why you're trying these jokes! Or perhaps the joke's on you. Maybe I should alert the police, and they'll find what kind of dancing is going on at this fountain.'

"Oh, I wouldn't do that, if you were you," I said. 'The curtain transforms you into your true self if you pass through it in joy to join the dancers, but if you go with a bad attitude, it might transform you into something unpleasant, like a grey cat or a black goggle-eyed goldfish.' He stared and I was surprised myself, since I hadn't known I was going to say those words until they were out of my mouth.

"Miss D'Angelis!" he said 'You may think this is amusing, but have you thought about how this will affect your academic standing? And your career?'

"His face flinched beneath his glasses and I suddenly understood his terror. Because he had never been through the Curtain of Signs, seeing other people tremble and wince because of his power, which he had so laboriously attained, was the only thing that made him feel alive and successful. My indifference made him fear that he had missed something more gratifying. He could not bear it. My smiling face was for him like the veil of fire and ice which marked the last border between ignorance and the true reality, and he feared to pay the price he had to pay to discover its meaning.

My heart warmed with compassion, and to comfort him I tried to wince and cry a little. I was only able to squeeze out one tear, a small one. 'I'm terribly sorry I got distracted, Dr. Bache. I've been so overwhelmed this semester. It's my senior year, and I've been so nervous about the future. Couldn't you give me just one more day?'

"I really shouldn't," he snapped. 'At your age, you ought to have learned responsibility. What is your life going to be like if you always go about missing deadlines?'

"Inside I laughed at his feeble tyranny, but outwardly I pleaded, 'Dr. Bache, I've never missed one before, have I? Can't you give me a break?'

"The relief that burst out on his face was pathetic. 'All right. Just this once. Get me the paper tomorrow and I'll only dock you a grade level.'

"Thank you, Dr. Bache!" I cried. So even though I really wanted to think only about the dance, I went back to my room and whipped up a paper for Dr. Bache from the froth of the fountain, which was elusive and teasing enough to get a C from him, I thought. But he had disappeared before he could grade it, and the professor who took over gave me an A-. His only comment was, 'Wonderful writing, Penelope. I only wish you had made your meaning clearer.'

"The next three nights I danced with Pollux and the others. On the third night as we danced under the stars, the music suddenly stopped and Pollux faltered. 'Someone followed you here,' he said.

"I turned and saw the curtain of water hanging near us and there was Dr. Bache, in a

black suit with his horn-rimmed spectacles staring at us angrily. I shrank up against Pollux and asked, 'What shall I do?'

"Desire for our light shining through your face has brought him here. He is smitten with the same longing you were. But I fear he will not have courage to cross. However, no one can draw back with impunity after coming this far. We must help him if we can. Call him as I called you!"

"But I'm not sure I can--can't one of the others--"

"He is not capable of seeing or hearing them; you are the only one he sees."

My voice shook a little, but I called out to him, 'Come to us, Dr. Bache! Come across! There is fire, but it burns for only a moment, and then all is fresh and cool!' The voices of the others echoed around me, 'Come to us! Come to us,' I now sensed for myself that Dr. Bache heard only me. For a moment his face was blank with astonishment. Then hope lighted it. He stepped into the curtain--and then I knew the pain had hit him. 'Stretch out your hands, Dr. Bache,' I cried. 'Come across! I will help you!' I reached in for him as Pollux had reached for me, but I could not find his hands.

"He had leaped back from the curtain at the first tinge of pain. His face was contorted with anger now. His eyes were bulging. 'You're cruel! You cruel minx! Why do you torture me like this? Come back, come back or I'll come in and drag you out!'"

"I drew away, crying 'Look out!' But he had already closed his eyes and plunged furiously in again, his hands stretched out to seize me. I felt the pain hit him even harder in this position, and the curtain expanded, growing ever thicker to contain him as he strove ever harder to drive through it with brute force. I heard Pollux crying, "This must end! This must end!" Dr. Bache was doubled over in agony, screaming 'Help! Help!' I reached in but could not find his hands; I started to enter the curtain, but Pollux drew me back.

"Don't go. It's too late for you to help him," he said.

"Then suddenly Dr. Bache's cries stopped and through the curtain I heard nothing but a soft plop, as of a fish leaping.

"It was all I could do to keep him from drowning," Pollux whispered in my ear. His hands were on my shoulders.

"It was grey dawn and everything dissolved. I found myself alone in the fountain under the dim light, and though I looked everywhere for Dr. Bache, there was no sign of him. But as I climbed up on the rim, I noticed a black telescope goldfish near the surface. I stared at him for a moment because I'd never seen one there before, and it seemed that he was staring back at me." Aunt Penny fell silent again.

III

"Well," said Oscar, after a long pause.

"Is that all there is? Why did you take the fish from the fountain?"

"I noticed him the next day too. I came to look at the fountain and all the other goldfish in it, when suddenly there he was, in the water not inches from me, staring angrily at me with his goggle-eyes. By that time I knew that Dr. Bache had disappeared. That night I tried to find Pollux and the others at the fountain, but they were not there; I met them elsewhere long afterwards, but never again from that fountain. However, the black goldfish still swam up to me, and even in the moonlight I saw him staring. Every day I passed the fountain, and there he was staring and me. So finally I bought a fishbowl, and on graduation day I went to the fountain and filled it. The black fish swam into it.

"I've kept him ever since. He stares at any painting I put in front of his bowl, and sometimes I set up my poems or stories there and he stares at them, page by page. I always know when he's finished a page because he starts thrashing about when he is bored. He still likes graham crackers and marshmallows. At first I used to float them on the water for him, but one night I forgot and they were gone anyway. I think a few years ago he started returning to human form during the hours of the night after midnight when the star Pollux shone. I see other signs of it every now and then. The crackers and marshmallows are eaten and sometimes I find books have been moved during the night and records changed."

"Do you--do you think he'll ever change back completely?" Louise asked, nervously.

"I don't know. Before he does, he will have to go through the curtain with the eagerness of welcome, or else turn forever away from it and be content not to know the mystery. But as long as he only stares and fears to go through it, this will be his form."

Oscar spoke up. "Aunt Penny, I think that's the craziest story I've ever heard. You ought to have the fish x-rayed so you can know if it really is a goldfish. Maybe he's a mutant or a walking fish, with retractable legs! Maybe he takes them out at night! Maybe that's how he got to the fountain--by walking."

Penny smiled indulgently. "What creative suggestions, Oscar! But I have no reason to X-ray Dr. Bache. He's survived fifteen years somehow, and I don't see how irradiating him can help."

But Oscar was getting more excited by the second. "Can't we stay here tonight, Aunt Penny? I'll stay in his room with a flashlight and see what really does happen."

"That wouldn't be wise, Oscar. Are you prepared to face the curtain and join the dancers joyfully? Or would you rush in greedily to seize a mysterious walking-fish for irradiation? If you did that, I fear you too might be transformed into something unpleasant, like an African clawed frog."

"But I'm sure--" began Oscar.

Louise took his arm. "We'd better go to the hotel and get settled," she said firmly. Then she glared covertly at her sister. "Are

you sure a mile is far enough away?"

Penny grabbed her suitcase. "We could go to the next town, if you want," she said.

The Ruddy Ghost A Rondel

by Joe R. Christopher

Did Lewis come, just having died before,
ruddier in his new life—"It's not so hard"?
So Phillips wrote, nor can one disregard
his statement as imaginative folklore.

But Phillips often was depressed, and bore
attempts to please his father which him marred:
did Lewis come, just having died before,
his eyes with twinkle, saying, "It's not so hard"?

And if he came, what truth did he restore:
that death was not a difficult discard;
that living could be 'joyed, however jarred;
that faith could be sustained forevermore?
Did Lewis come, just having died before?

AUBADE

by Gwenth E. Hood

In the garden by an ivy-covered wall,
They wrapped themselves long time in loving arms,
trusting in and yet loath to hear the call
Of one on watch nearby to give alarms:
"Take heed, fair friends, now sinks the soft-eyed moon,
The dawn, alas the dawn, it comes so soon!"

The dawn is come! In desperate farewell,
Each clings to each, and the tears they have repressed
Break forth, lest mortal lands where they must dwell
Should kill their courage for their solemn quest.
So heavy is my heart I nearly swoon:
Take heed, sweet friends, now sinks the soft-eyed moon!

They are bound by an unalterable decree
to walk in faded lands where joy has failed
and find their loves again in constancy,
beneath the mundane crust which has them veiled.
Fair friends, with thorny tasks your paths are strewn!
The dawn, alas the dawn, it comes so soon.

Now hand in hand, besides the paths of sleep
Lethe-waters soon will make your eyes forget.
Inside a swaying boat you then must creep
to leave the faerie lands in which you met.
The love which draws you on in mystery
Will bring you, sure, the priceless victory;
More lasting is the crown of diamonds hewn.
Take heed, fair friends, now sinks the soft-eyed moon.

Love crossing hate evoked a stern decree
The king still rages, whose power on all is strong,
save victors who defeat morality.
Lose not this chance by lingering too long.
Such love as yours the earth shall overwhelm
And win your welcome back to faerie-realm.
Take heed, fair friends, now sinks the soft-eyed moon
The dawn, alas the dawn, it comes so soon!

cicada heritage

tree limb ends are brown.
 (except poplars escaped.)
i had forgotten that
 from seventeen years past.
we were forest-camping,
 vacation time for six --
(tent fee we could afford)
 and the kids watched "bee-bees,"
wondering -- tried to count
 all but the bright crisp song.

this summer dead end-branches hanging down
bring quickly to remembrance old histories,
metallic fire-scorched, ahead of fact, sere,
anticipating nuclear spite-storm.

 i sought the little people -- friends,
 mentors from a kinder past,
 not believing they were gone.
 city trails are thin,
 hard to follow
 screened by smog,
 gnat-weak,
 cold.

yet i found some, carefully hidden now,
not in the thicket patches of scrapwoods
whose clearing-expenses builders had shunned --
 (though sometimes they slip out and
 round-dance there.)
but they hide here on the steep stream banks
which almost dry creeks have cut long ago,
before the springs that fed them were destroyed
and runoff waters diverted to drains.
(one close by here is still called 'herring run,'
although most days it would not float minnows)

so few are left, and they are hidden well,
quickly out of sight, bridge-glimpsed rarities
like our hopeful views of kids' heritage.
tree limb tips fall, but deep tap roots searching,
well supply the great stem (water as life)
in spite of metal eggs slit into bark
of our world's culture and the spying eyes,
doubtful -- mistrusting most of all, themselves,
cannot destroy trunk-stalwart root courage
and propaganda's chorus of death dies
for another **cycle** -- green leaves wither,
as quietly another ring is grown.

-- Charles Rampp



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